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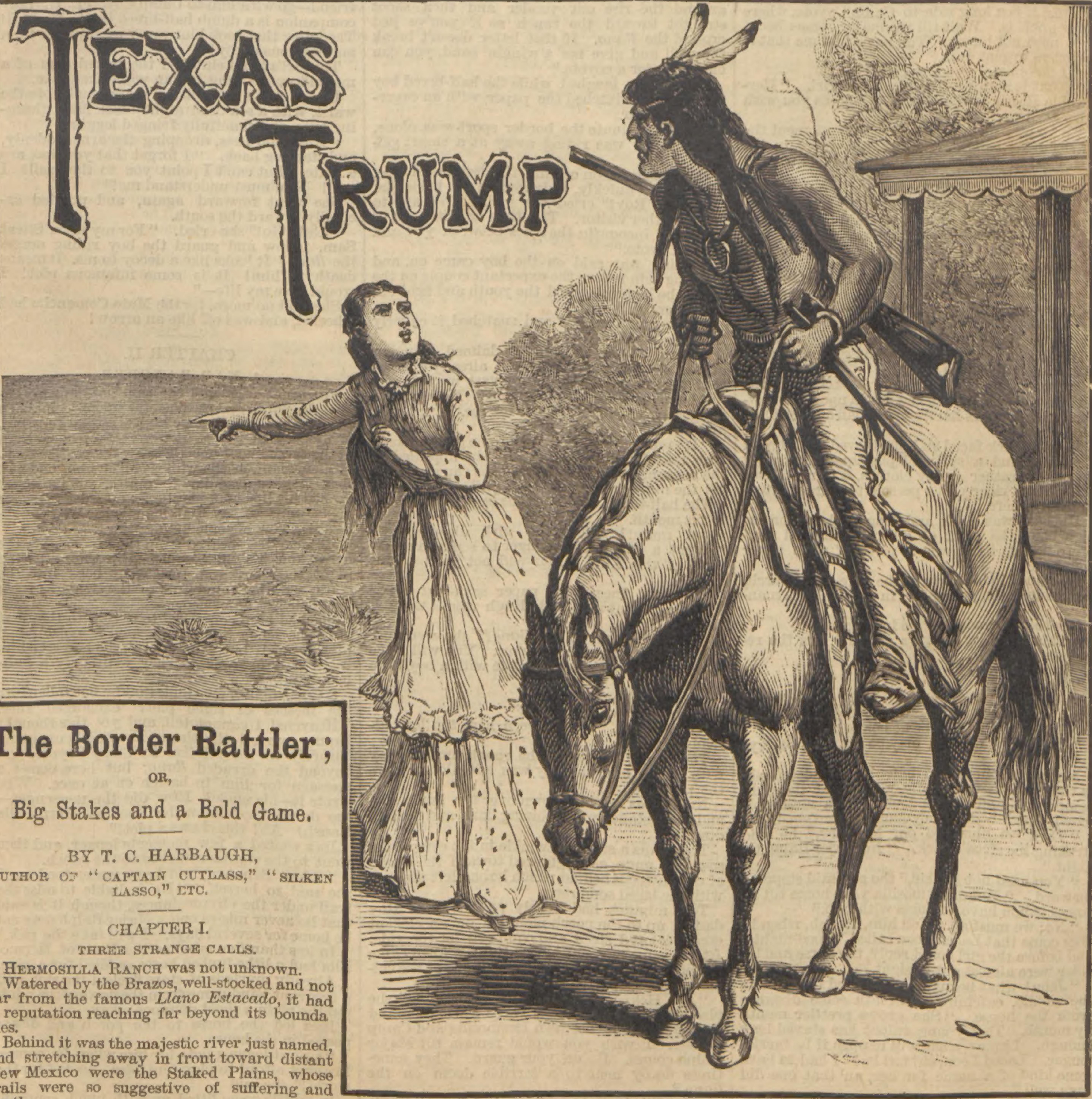
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TEXAS TRUMP



The Border Rattler;

OR,

Big Stakes and a Bold Game.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN CUTLASS," "SILKEN
LASSO," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THREE STRANGE CALLS.

HERMOSILLA RANCH was not unknown. Watered by the Brazos, well-stocked and not far from the famous *Llano Estacado*, it had a reputation reaching far beyond its boundaries.

Behind it was the majestic river just named, and stretching away in front toward distant New Mexico were the Staked Plains, whose trails were so suggestive of suffering and death.

Some people wondered why Major Ralph

"GO! GO!" SHE CRIED. "FOR MY SAKE, SILENT SAM, FOLLOW AND GUARD THE BOY RIDING ACROSS THE LLANO!"

Rogers, the proprietor, had planted himself on that particular spot, but he seemed contented there, with the lovely woman whom he called his ward, and as it was his business alone, no one ventured to question him about his choice of home.

Rogers was an old frontiersman, and a man who had roughed it the golden years of his life: he had been miner, proprietor and vigilante, but the one being whom he seemed to worship knew less about him than many others.

On the veranda of the rancher's house one evening there sat two young people, one of whom, a young man of twenty-three, was enjoying a fragrant cigar.

His companion was the major's ward, beautiful in the simple dress that clothed her willowy figure, and the possessor of a voice rich in silvery tones.

"I wish he would come to-night," said the girl. "Your stay will end when he comes, I know, but you will have a companion across the *llano*."

"I shall not insist," was the answer. "He is under no obligations to accompany me. Besides, I know the road, and am not afraid to travel alone."

"But the peril," cried the girl starting. "The trail is the work-ground of desperadoes, red and white. It is a long ride to Camp Coyote, where your uncle is. Wait till the major comes back. You need not hurry. You have told me that it is not an urgent case."

"I have been here a week."

"That is nothing!" laughed the girl. "Hermosilla Ranch is your home as long as you wish to make it so."

There was no reply, for at that moment the young man caught sight of an object in the southeast, and all at once he left his chair with an exclamation.

"He comes at last!"

"Not the major, it cannot be! He would hardly come from that direction," said his companion, who had by this time caught sight of the same object. "That is a single horseman, and he will not be alone when he comes back."

"We are going to have a visitor, then."

It was now apparent that the man fairly in sight was rapidly approaching the ranch-home. He was eagerly watched by the two young people on the porch, and in the shadows of evening he swung on over the undulating ground, and at last dashed up to the house.

"Heavens! he is a stranger," exclaimed the girl starting back with gaze fixed upon the newcomer who was as handsome a man as ever filled a saddle.

Robust, dark-faced and black-eyed, with broad shoulders and a splendid physique, admirably set off by rather gaudy clothes, *a la* ranchero, the solitary rider was a person to attract attention anywhere.

His hair was black and long, and the breeze blew back the front of a broad-brimmed sombrero whose band was a piece of wide silver lacing.

He reined in his horse at the edge of the porch, and saluted the young girl in a chivalrous manner.

"Is this Hermosilla?" he inquired.

"This is Major Ralph's ranch," was the response.

"Is he at home?"

"No."

"Ah!" said the ranchero with disappointed air. "A long ride for nothing, but I can come again. When will he be at home?"

"To-night, perhaps; may be not for two days yet."

More than once from under his abundant lashes the man in the saddle glanced at the girl's companion, and in his looks was a noticeable scowl which boded the young man no good.

"Then we must go on, Mercury," he said stroking his steed's neck. "No Major Ralph tonight."

"You need not go, sir," the girl said stepping forward. "Make Hermosilla your home till he comes if you have business with him."

"No; we must go. Tell him, though, when he does come that Laced Leon called. Good-night!" and before the girl could reply, the horse and his rider were almost out of sight.

"Jehu! what beauty!" ejaculated the man in the saddle, catching his breath some distance from the house. "She grows prettier month by month. That young galoot has stayed long enough. I know what will happen if he tarries longer. Laced Leon, eh? ha! ha! I had to have some kind of a name for her, an' that one did very well."

The man passed on until a clump of cottonwoods hid him from the house.

"Halt, Mercury!" he exclaimed. "We must play the balance of our little game here."

A moment later he was joined by a boy on horseback—a youth not past sixteen, but well built and having the swarthy skin and glittering eyes of a half-breed.

"I found them together, King," laughed Laced Leon. "She's got him fairly in the net, an' by heavens! it suits me not. I know just what to do. He must continue his journey forthwith. I'll start him!"

Laced Leon drew a little book from an inner pocket and laid it across the horn of the saddle. Then, covering it with a piece of paper, he wrote as follows with a short pencil:

CAMP COYOTE.

"*My DEAR ROY:*—I want to see you *at once*. I am very sick, an' think I am dangerous. Let no grass grow under your horse's hoofs after you get this letter. This boy is a mute, but you can trust him. For heaven's sake come to me at once. Time is precious!

"Your uncle,

HUGH.

"Here," said Laced Leon, folding this letter which he thrust into the boy's hand. "You take this to the young man with the girl on the porch back thar. Remember that you are a mute, King. I have said so in the letter. Ride around the rise out yonder and then shoot straight toward the ranch as if you've just crossed the *llano*. If that letter doesn't break the spell and give me a winnin' hand, you can choke me for a coyote."

Laced Leon laughed while the half-breed boy grinned and clutched the paper with an eagerness to deliver.

The next minute the border sport was alone, and the boy was riding away at a smart gallop.

He vanished soon around the designated rise, and turning quickly, rode toward the hacienda.

"Look, Roy!" cried the girl. "We are to have another visitor. This time he comes out of the *terra incognita* that lies between you and Camp Coyote."

Nothing was said as the boy came on, and drawing rein before the expectant couple on the porch, he leaned toward the youth and held out the paper.

Roy sprung forward and snatched it eagerly from his hand.

"Terrible!" he suddenly exclaimed, glancing at the breathless girl, who had already guessed that the message was one of vast importance. "I have tarried here too long. My uncle is dangerously sick. He sends for me. I must go at once."

"It cannot be so bad," said the girl. "Is it true that Hugh is deathly ill?" she appealed to the messenger. "Tell me that he can stay here till the major comes and then go."

The half-breed boy shook his head and pointed to his mouth.

"A mute!" cried the girl, disappointed. "What a singular messenger to send on an errand of this kind. You will not go to-night, Roy?"

"I must, Inez. The paper says '*at once*'. You forget that it is uncle Hugh who is the sick man."

"But the perils of the *llano*?" she went on. "See! it is almost night now. You will have to make the dangerous distance with a boy for a guide."

"But I will make it!"

"Then you will not stay?"

"I dare not. I have been here too long already, I fear."

The young beauty of the ranch turned away with a sigh, and the boy was left alone before the porch.

Night was settling down over the landscape, and the distance was growing dark and forbidding.

There was a strange twinkle in the eyes of the so-called mute, as he glanced toward the clump of cottonwoods behind which he had left the man with the laced sombrero.

Ten minutes had barely passed when Roy dashed up to the porch mounted on an elegant cream colored steed and equipped for the ride. At the same moment Major Ralph's ward came out of the house and halted beside one of the columns that supported the veranda.

"For Heaven's sake be on the watch," she pleaded of the youth. "There are a thousand and one dangers between Hermosilla and Camp Coyote. I wish you would remain till Major Ralph comes. Be on your guard. They sometimes decoy men to a terrible doom on the *llano*."

"But this is no decoy," laughed Roy. "Uncle Hugh is no double-dealer. Give my compli-

ments to Major Ralph when he comes. Good-by, Inez."

He dropped the girl's hand and lifted his hat as he wheeled and motioned the half-breed boy to follow.

"Watch! watch!" called the Peri of Hermosilla Ranch after him in tones of the deepest solicitude. "The perils of the *llano* are more numerous than the stars. If Major Ralph comes soon, I will send him after you."

The young man and his strange guide were already beyond hearing distance, and the girl could see the horses and their riders mingling with the shadows of night.

"What if it should be a decoy of some kind?" she exclaimed. "Men have been decoyed to the death-dangers of the Staked Plains. He may be a victim."

She looked southward again, but the twain had disappeared.

"Oh, when will Major Ralph come?" she cried.

At that moment a horse dashed up to the porch, and had no sooner halted there than she was at his side,

"Major Ralph! No!—heavens! it is the Mute Comanche!" she cried. "I believe Heaven has sent you here at this hour. Quick! wheel about and follow yon trail. Catch up with Roy—my friend—go with him to Camp Coyote! His only companion is a dumb half-breed boy! My God! The letter that took him away might have been an infamous decoy!"

The girl's hand clutched the naked arm of a magnificent looking Indian while she spoke.

He sat on his horse like a statue, naked to the waist, with a sea of straight black hair, gleaming eyes, and fancifully fringed leggings.

"Ah!" said Inez, dropping the arm suddenly, and starting back. "I forget that you, too, are a mute. But can't I point you to the trail? I will! You must understand me!"

She went forward again, and pointed excitedly toward the south.

"Go! Go!" she cried. "For my sake, Silent Sam, follow and guard the boy riding across the *llano*! It looks like a decoy to me. It means death to him! It is some infamous plot! I will give my life!"

She said no more, for the Mute Comanche had wheeled, and was off like an arrow!

CHAPTER II.

A MAD RANCHER.

FOR some moments the rancher's ward occupied the porch and watched the flying Comanche out of sight. A strange man was this red-skin, a mystery in red, as it were. He seemed born to the saddle, and nobody knew his past history.

Silent Sam, as the whites called him, had not that look so peculiar to mutes, yet he never opened his lips, and his silence afforded some an opportunity to say that his silence was the result of a vow of some kind.

He soon disappeared from the girl's sight; the horse and his rider vanished in the gathering night together, and Inez went back into the house with her mind full of the strange events that had just happened.

She had been compelled to part with the guest of the hacienda just when a solid friendship had been formed; but, worst of all, she had seen him begin a dangerous journey with only a half-breed mute for a comrade.

"What makes me think that he has fallen into the meshes of some plot?" exclaimed Inez. "Heavens! I cannot tell, and yet this thought haunts me all the time. He was journeying leisurely to the relative in Camp Coyote, just beyond the dreaded *llano*; but here comes a messenger for him to hasten on at once. Who wrote it—his uncle? How did the messenger—the dumb boy—know he was at Hermosilla Ranch? Ah! this shows a plot!"

Inez waited a few moments longer, and then went to the stables attached to the ranch.

"Silent Sam may not have understood me," she said to herself. "He is liable to miss the trail under the circumstances, though it is said that he never misses one. Major Ralph may not be home for several days. I will take the risk."

In less than five minutes the Rose of Hermosilla had a lithe-limbed horse saddled for a ride.

Already myriads of stars flecked the sky, and a fragrant wind came from the flowers that dotted the plain a short distance away.

Inez led the horse to the porch and disappeared in the house.

"I must leave a note for him when he comes. I cannot afford to play him false—no, not for the world!" she said.

In a little room fitted up with much magnificence for that quarter of the Southwest, she

took writing materials from a dressing-case, and left the following letter for the absent rancher:

"DEAR GUARDIAN:—Think not that I have left you. The guest who came to the ranch a week ago—a young man named Roy Berdan—has been decoyed upon the *Llano*. His destination is Camp Coyote, where lives an uncle whom he has never seen. He was waiting here to see you when the urgent message came. I fear it is a plot. I have gone to bring him back, or to be his companion to Coyote. Just before the message came, Laced Leon—whom you may know—stopped here to see you. Don't upbraid me for what I have done. I will come back when I have done my duty."

"Your little child,

INEZ."

The girl put this note where the coming rancher would be certain to see it, then, having previously armed herself with a silver-mounted revolver, she went out and mounted the horse.

A word and the merest touch of the spur were enough to start the steed, and the next moment Inez of Hermosilla was riding toward the fringe of the dreaded *Llano*, and to some of the most exciting adventures ever had on the southwest border.

For some time the little note in the boudoir was left undisturbed. The man for whom it was intended did not come, but by and by a cat-like figure crept up the stair and opened the door as cautiously as if Inez was sleeping lightly in the soft lamplight.

This figure when it stood revealed, was one which when once seen would never be forgotten. In stature not over five feet, with humped shoulders, a leathery and repulsive face, long ape-like arms, and cold gray eyes never for a moment still, the person who entered the girl's room was by no means prepossessing.

He wore dark-colored moccasins which gave forth no sound, and it were hard to tell whether he was Indian, peon or half-breed.

A grin distorted his countenance when he found himself where he had never been before—in Inez's room—and for a moment he stood near the door like a person dazzled by the surroundings.

Presently the dancing eyes fell upon the letter on the dressing-case and bounding forward he seized it.

"Girl leave this for Flippo to fix up, eh?" he laughed. "Aha! he fix it so that Major Ralph will swear when he get back."

It did not take the dwarfish villain long to master the letter, and when he had done so, he set out on a search for writing materials which he found where Inez had deposited them.

Then, seating himself at a little table under a lamp, he studied the letter intently for some minutes, and moved the inkless pen carefully over some of the letters.

"I have it now—ha, ha!" he suddenly laughed, and for the next few moments he wrote on the sheet he had taken from the girl's writing-box.

More than once while he wrote he glanced at the letter lying at his elbow, and when he finished he had produced this startling announcement:

"DEAR GUARDIAN:—I am tired of life at Hermosilla. I have gone off with a young man I love better than I ever loved you. Don't follow us; it might be dangerous. When you read this I will be far across the *Llano* with Roy." INEZ."

The girl's letter was thrust by the dwarf into his pocket, and the one just finished was left in its place on the stand. The handwriting was the exact counterfeit of Inez's graceful chiropgraphy, and Flippo laughed aloud as he inspected his infamous work.

"If this doesn't raise a tornado when Major Ralph gets home, tread me down for a horned toad!" he exclaimed. "They think Flippo forgets, but they are fools. I told her that I would get even one o' these days, an' I will! That's two kinds o' blood in me, an' she made 'em both boil. Aha! my girl—my Hermosilla Rose! I wish you a fine trip across the *Llano Estacado*!"

He left the room with a laugh and went down the stair.

Nobody had seen him enter the room, and his villainy was likely to remain undetected. There was absolute demonism in his eyes.

"A horse, by Jupiter!" he exclaimed, reaching the porch. "I was not a moment too soon."

The quick ears of the dwarf had heard the rapid gallop of a horse, and from his post behind one of the columns he saw a man leap from the saddle and land on the porch with an exclamation of joy.

"Home again! Inez, my girl, where are you?" cried a man's voice.

There was no reply, and impatient for a glimpse of the beautiful girl whom he expected

to welcome him, a handsome man of forty sprung into the house, and bounded up the stair.

"The storm will burst in about two minutes," grinned Flippo. "This country that hasn't seen a tornado for some time, will see one now!"

He did not follow Major Ralph, the rancher, up the steps to the little boudoir.

He did not see him approach the bed with noiseless tread, as if afraid of disturbing a sleeper.

The Texan found the door ajar; he saw the lamp burning where the girl had left it, and then he saw the paper lying near by.

Major Ralph stepped forward and picked it up. He did not doubt that Inez had penned it.

All at once his eyes seemed to fly from his head; he staggered back as if he had received a blow, and then a loud cry parted his lips:

"My God! this blow is worse than death!" he exclaimed. "What! Inez my Texas rose, fled? Merciful heavens! what have I done to deserve this? But I will follow! Fool she was to leave even this behind. It throws me upon the trail; it gives me a clew, and the man who decoyed her from the ranch shall feel the blow the Texas rancher can inflict! Better for him if he had never seen the sunlight!"

"I've opened the vials of wrath, haven't I?" chuckled the dwarf who heard all this. "I knew my letter would unchain a Texan tiger, an' ef I don't reap a happy harvest out of it, shoot me for a mustang! I'm little an' not very handsome; but, oh, my!"

Major Ralph the rancher came down-stairs three steps at a bound with clinched hands and blazing eyes.

"I'd sooner see my girl dead than this!" he exclaimed as he sprung out upon the porch.

"But I will show them I am no laggard when it comes to vengeance. I have been sport and Vigilante. I can play more *roles* than one. The man who has played this infamous game shall suffer!"

"All right, ef you kin find him out, Major Ralph!" chuckled Flippo.

The rancher sprung to saddle and dashed to the stables.

"He'll do it all afore he cools down," said the dwarfish villain in the shadow of the pillar. "I wonder if the girl will see my hand in this when he strikes. I'll make her see it afore I'm through."

He waited till Major Ralph came back on a fresh horse, and he saw him draw rein in front of the house.

"This is the most terrible welcome home I ever had!" the Texan said. "Some devilish infamy is at the bottom of it all. Woe to you, Roy, whoever you are! You must be an old foe to strike me thus!"

He turned and waved his right hand in parting salute at the house, then, touching the fresh horse with the spur, he darted away leaving behind the echo of one word—vengeance!

"I've played a master hand to-night, ha, ha!" laughed the hunchback left behind.

CHAPTER III.

THE LLANO TRAIL.

ROY BERDAN had parted from Inez with many regrets, which, at the moment of parting, he had made out to conceal.

His sojourn at Hermosilla Ranch had been the happiest week of his life, and if the laced sport's well-worded message had not come, he would have been there yet.

He did not think of treachery when, with King the half-breed boy for a guide, he rode toward the *Llano*, and set his face for Camp Coyote on the border land far away.

The boy had played mute so well that the young man did not question him, though he yearned to know something about the uncle whom he had never seen. The night had darkened around the two riders, but the sky was thickly studded with stars, and the horses and their riders threw shadows where the ground was bare.

Roy, who believed the *Llano Estacado* to be a vast weary plain, soon found himself mistaken. He found instead rich grass and great canyons, the walls of which rose like old battlements, and in the deep passes through which the trail led at times, were admirable lurking-places for a foe.

Behind him, silent and sullen, rode the Mute Comanche, in no haste to catch up, but with a pair of twinkling eyes constantly on the alert.

There was something striking in the half-naked Indian riding under the stars, as if pressing sternly forward to a goal of some kind.

He might have urged his horse forward and

soon caught up with the youth and his guide, but he seemed content to remain behind.

"Everything moves along swimmin'ly so far," muttered a man who filled a saddle in one of the loneliest canyons of the *Llano*. "They can't be far back ef King has done his duty, an' I see no reason for doubtin' the boy. He war gettin' too thick with the ranch rose. I had ter interfere now, an' by Jupiter! I hev!"

This man did not look like the person who called himself Laced Leon when he rode up to Major Ralph's porch a short time before that same night. He had no laced sombrero now, no gaudy jacket, and no tassels at his boots. But it was the same man.

Clad in rough, dark clothes now, he looked the picture of the ideal rough, and the lasso dangling from the horn of his saddle, with the revolver near by, confirmed his character in mute but emphatic language.

The *Llano* spider was waiting for the prey for whom he had spread his net.

"Ef he ever sees his uncle Hugh, may death trump my ace," continued this man while he waited. "I don't lose any games no sirree! They all hev ter stan' back when Texas Trump ther Border Rattler, takes a hand in ther proceedin's. Hark! what war that?—a hoss?"

The man leaned forward and listened a moment, then he drew suddenly to one side and loosened the lasso coil at the saddle-horn.

"I didn't hev ter wait long. King knew his business an' did it well. I kin depend on thet young mixed-blood."

The desperado and his horse seemed a part of the wall which they almost touched. The animal seemed to know the needs of the hour, for, though he heard the coming horses, he did not send out a whinny of betrayal.

Texas Trump waited for the riders whom he knew to consist of two persons.

"The next note you take in, Roy Berdan, won't be written on this mountain sphere!" chuckled the sport. "Ha! ha! what a fool you ar'l Wal, ef I don't wear ther Texan rose, shoot me for a mustang thief. Oh, I'm a daisy on ther *Llano* trail!"

Nearer and nearer to this man waiting with his bronze hand on the fatal coil came the two persons riding over the plain.

Roy Berdan had loosened his revolvers for any sudden emergency that might arise, and they were ready to his hand. In the eyes of King, the half-breed, lurked a singular gleam of triumph, and he was looking constantly ahead as if in search of some one.

"Come inter ther *Llano* trap, my Texas fly!" laughed Texas Trump. "Yer last thought will be ov ther ranch blossom, no doubt. Mine is ov her now, an' I could whisper in yer ears that she's a flower worth playin' for."

In another moment the figures of two horses and their riders entered the little canyon, and Texas Trump's eyes suddenly blazed.

"Hyer!—King an' ther fly!" he said.

Just then he saw the twain, the youth from the South a little in advance of his guide, who seemed to know that the blow was about to fall.

Roy Berdan rode by the lurker and so near that he could almost have touched him.

The half-breed boy saw the waiting figure and stopping without noise, let the Border Rattler drop into his place.

It was the work of two seconds, and so well and silently was it done, that the youth did not notice the change.

He had now on his track, almost at his very side, the villain who had decoyed him from Hermosilla Ranch.

Texas Trump leaned forward, with the noose of the black lasso gripped in his hand, and his eyes fastened on his young victim.

"Some men ar' born fools, an' you ar' one ov 'em, Roy!" he laughed. "Why don't yer look over yer shoulder an' see who's at yer heels?"

But the youth did not oblige the grinning desperado. He kept the trail still visible in the starlight, and rode leisurely forward as if the time was not at hand for rapid riding.

"Oh Hades! let us end this!" suddenly exclaimed Texas Trump. "I'm whar I kin safely leave him for ther *Llano* vultures. I want ter play Laced Leon ag'in!"

The hand that held the lasso noose went up, and the *Llano* sport darted forward as he let the black cord fly.

The next instant it dropped over the head of the young man a few feet away, and a quick jerk on the Rattler's part pinioned his arms to his body.

"In God's name, what means this?" cried Roy Berdan.

"Only ther tightenin' ov a noose!" laughed

Texas Trump, coming up and looking into the youth's face as if he did not fear recognition. "Such things ar' common in this kentry. Don't go inter spasms over a little incident like this, my Austin pink."

"Who ar' you—not my mute companion?"

"Not by a yard or two! Do I look like a boy?" And Texas Trump laughed again.

"Why this lasso?" demanded Roy, his bright eyes flashing.

"Wait awhile an' see," was the answer. "You forget that we ar' on every man's ground. This is ther *Llano Estacado*—a fightin' field for all. Who am I, eh? It would hardly do ter tell you who I have been within ther last ten hours, but now I'm a free lance what kin play a game that would astonish all Texas. Come! we move along, Mr. Berdan."

"You know me!" exclaimed the astonished youth.

"Bet yer boots, an' I could tell you whar you 'r goin' ef I war a mind ter."

"Heavens! then you know—"

"Thet Heavy Hugh waits for his nephew?—yes I know thatet," was the interruption. "I'm afraid, Roy, that you hed better hev remained in the South. This is a bad kentry for boys who hunt their relatives alone."

Roy Berdan, astonished, looked into the speaker's face.

"You are not my uncle's enemy, are you?" he asked.

"Not his, but yours, maybe."

The youth could not repress a cry of astonishment.

This cool man with the glittering eyes his foe? Then he was in danger.

Texas Trump suddenly caught the bridle-rein of the young man's horse, and the two steeds walked on side by side.

"I demand to know what this means!" cried Roy. "I am in your hands because I have been lassoed when I suspected no danger. You have either killed my companion or else he is your tool. Tell me what all this means. I demand it."

"Oh, I'm Texas Trump, ther Border Rattler an' I'm playin one ov ther slickest games ever played on the *llano*!" laughed the desperado.

"It is against me, then?"

"Not so much as it is for another," was the answer. "I'd be a fool ter let yer get ter Camp Coyote an' ter Heavy Hugh, yer uncle. Ye'r ter be kept from him forever, Roy, my Austin pink, an' from Hermosilla Ranch till Gabriel toots his bugle."

"All of which means that I am to die on the *llano*?" said the youth calmly.

"Thet's about ther heft of it!" was the reply, spoken in triumphant but cold and merciless tones. "I'm goin' ter Camp Coyote, but mebbe I won't give Heavy Hugh ther particulars."

"Devil!"

"Yes, that's what I've been called a thousand times," was the retort. "Whar I'm best known I am called Texas Trump, ther Border Rattler. Thar's a queer society in Camp Coyote, but you'll never git introduced ter it, because I've interfered. I'm goin' ter toss yer out ov my way."

"How can I be in it?"

"You stan' between Texas Trump an' ther daisiest bonanza that ever existed. It's not in lides an' horns, my blusin' flower-bed; it's not in hoofs and acres. I wouldn't play fer nonsense like that. My bonanza wears dresses."

Roy Berdan recoiled with a startling cry.

A name leaped over his lips.

"Inez!" he exclaimed.

Texas Trump's hand tightened on the bridle-rein, his eyes glittered anew.

"Who says that my bonanza ain't ther biggest an' richest out o' doors?" he laughed. "I play no boy's game for it, Roy, an' I tell ye so plainly because I hold ther winnin' cards."

"But I am not in your path."

"I'm no fool! I kin see what'd come ov yer stayin' a week under the eyes ov ther ranch Cleopatra," cried Texas Trump. "A thistle cut off in the bud will never sting any one. When you trample a young rattler under yer foot, you never hear a hiss. Oh, I'm no tenderfoot, Roy."

By this time the two men had left the canyon, and their horses stood on the plain in the brilliant starlight side by side.

"Take yer choice," suddenly said Texas Trump. "I am goin' ter leave you hyer. Knife or revolver, Roy; or would you sooner be dragged ter death behind my hoss?"

It was a terrible alternative, but the young man did not blanch.

"I am in your power. I will make no choice of deaths," he said. "For this deed there will come some time a day of vengeance."

"Revenge hez been huntin' me in a dozen shapes for as many years, but I'm hyer yet in first class condition," laughed the desperado, as he quietly drew a revolver, and Roy Berdan heard an ominous click in the starlight.

All at once the two horses pricked up their ears and the young Texan could not repress a start.

"Never mind—it is my pard," said Texas Trump looking at Roy. "Ther hoss that's comin' up carries my tool, an' yer guide—ther dumb half-breed. Thar's no hope in ther quarter, Roy."

The desperate sport straightened as he finished and leveled the revolver at the youth's breast.

"When I count five," he said, "I touch the trigger. One—two—three—"

The next moment the horse came up and halted between the pair.

"Jehosaphat! hades an' horns!" cried Texas Trump recoiling. "I war lookin' for Satan first!"

Well might he reel and stare; the person who had come between was the Mute Comanche!

CHAPTER IV.

FACING FLIPPO'S LIE.

ROY BERDAN the late guest of Hermosilla Ranch was as much astonished as Texas Trump, but his astonishment was of a different sort. The interference which had prolonged his life was timely and startling, but it was apparent that the last man wanted or expected by the Border Rattler, had come up.

The Mute Comanche looked at the two men, but his glittering eyes became fixed on Texas Trump.

"Hang it all! I'm not goin' ter let ther silent Injun cheat me out o' ther bonanza!" suddenly grated the sport. "See hyer, reddy; you go back. This is no game ov yours."

The sole reply was the sudden tiger-like leap of a red hand, and Texas Trump felt four velvety fingers encircle his wrist. The Indian leaned forward until his face almost touched the Llano desperado's; then, lifting the other hand, he pointed westward.

"Thet means 'go away', eh?" grated Texas Trump.

The Comanche's eyes said, "Yes!"

For several seconds the outstretched arm did not move, and the mute Indian glared at the sport in a manner which told that he was not there to be trifled with.

"Mebbe," muttered Texas Trump, "mebbe I had better go, an' play a new game. This infernal Injun ain't ter be fooled with; but who war lookin' for 'im hyer? He's only balked my game for a while. He nor no other livin' mortal kin block it forever. You've got me, an' I give in," to the Comanche; "but, remember that this meddlin' with my business will be remembered an' attended to afore long!"

He touched his horse lightly as he concluded, and when the animal moved off, the *llano* sport found the dumb red-skin riding at his side.

Roy Berdan sat spellbound in his saddle.

"That strange Indian will come back," he said to himself. "I owe my life to him, and I will wait here to tell him so."

He saw Texas Trump and his watcher disappear, but he did not see the Mute Comanche point again into the west while he told the *llano* rattle with his merciless eyes that it would be dangerous to follow him.

"Time makes all things even," ground Texas Trump. "Knife, lasso an' revolver settle many a human debt. I'll not forget you, my red daisy ov Texas," and with a look that seemed capable of killing, he gathered up the reins and dashed out of the Indian's sight.

Silent Sam came back to Roy before he looked for him, and he started when he saw the red-skin's eyes riveted upon him.

The next instant he put forth his hand and dropped it into the Comanche's palm.

"Be this my pledge of eternal friendship," he said, forgetting that Texas Trump had called the Indian a mute. "I owe you a debt which I can never pay, but forever call Roy Berdan your friend. With that white villain out of my way, I will continue my journey to Camp Coyote."

The Indian's hand when released dropped to his steed's neck, and a moment later the twain were riding across the *llano*.

"I am to have a companion and a guide," ejaculated the young man. "Warned of foes by his interference, I am now doubly armed, and woe to Texas Trump and his friends who attempt a desperate game!"

More than once Roy Berdan glanced at the stalwart and silent ally who rode at his side. The Indian had come from toward Hermosilla

Ranch. Had Inez sent him? Had she impressed the Comanche with the belief that her friend was in danger?

If she had done this, the young traveler had to thank the Rose of Hermosilla.

As for Texas Trump, he rode a short distance westward and then drew rein with a mad ejaculation.

"Let 'em go ter Coyote!" he exclaimed. "Ther youngster will find his relative thar, but that won't eucher me in the end. Ef Texas Trump ain't a match for all combinations, he'll leave his old stampin'-ground. I'm goin' back. I'm goin' ter put on ther lace once more."

He turned his horse about, and instead of following the youth and his Indian pard, rode toward Hermosilla Ranch, then miles away.

In a certain canyon several miles from the scene of his discomfiture by Silent Sam, he found a cavern whose whereabouts he seemed to know, and there, with some garments which he took from a natural shelf, he turned himself into Laced Leon so completely that the identity of Texas Trump was entirely lost.

"Oh! I'm ther daisy rattler ov these parts!" he laughed as he walked back to his horse. "I'm a galoot ov many disguises, none of which hev ever been penetrated, an' Texas Trump ov one place is never Texas Trump ov another. Beat me at cool games, will yer? Eucher Satan ef yer kin!"

Out on the boundless *llano* once more, with the east wind in his face and cunning in his eyes, rode the Border Rattler, with his steed moving toward Major Ralph's ranch.

All at once he halted as if an enemy had risen before him.

"A hoss an' his rider!" he exclaimed, and then he leaned forward with an expression of keen curiosity.

He did not have to wait long, for the objects he had mentioned were speedily evolved from the starlight, and Texas Trump caught a bridle-rein and stopped a horse, while a cry of astonishment greeted him.

"My dear child, aren't you lost?" he asked, looking into the face of the young girl whom he had halted. "The *llano* is a dangerous place for the Rose of Hermosilla. Aha! you know me! I called at sundown ter see Major Ralph. We will go back now. Let Laced Leon hev ther honor ov bein' yer escort."

Inez seemed too surprised to let slip a single word in remonstrance.

She could look into the man's face, and wonder if he had not risen from the earth to confront her there, and prevent her from carrying out her design of joining Roy.

What! go back to the ranch without accomplishing her purpose? The girl drew back with a gesture of refusal.

"I am not lost," she said. "I know where I am going. You will let me go on."

"Across ther plains?"

"Perhaps."

"I can't do that," said Texas Trump. "I beg yer pardon, Inez my ranch flower, but my duty is ter take yer back ter Hermosilla. What ef ther major should come back, an' find yer missin'? It might unbalance him. No, back ter ther ranch!"

He turned the girl's horse about, with but slight remonstrance on her part.

"What brought yer out hyer?" he asked.

"My friend—the guest whom you saw with me when you called at the ranch," was the reply. "A letter came for him shortly after you left. It hurried him across the *llano*—to Camp Coyote. He had a dumb boy, the messenger, for his protector and guide—that was all."

"An' you war goin' ter strengthen his escor?"

"Yes."

"Never fear about ther youngster," laughed the desperado. "He's got more help than ther boy by this time. Two persons passed me awhile back—a white man an' a big Injun."

"The Monte Comanche! thank Heaven!" ejaculated Inez. "He is safe then. I know that silent red-man. He is a host in himself. All the dangers of the *Estacado* can not prevent him from seeing Roy safe to Camp Coyote. Now I am willing to go back to the hacienda."

The man who now called himself Laced Leon smiled, and dropping the rein he had held up to that moment, rode leisurely at the girl's side.

"Who is this friend ov yours?" he suddenly asked.

"Roy Berdan."

"From ther South?"

"From Austin."

"You've known him for some time, eh?"

"For a week only," said Inez, with a smile. "I never saw him before he came to Hermosilla on his road to Camp Coyote. He had letters of

introduction to the major, my guardian, and would have waited for him if the message brought by the dumb boy had not hastened his departure. The uncle in Camp Coyote he has never seen. A few days ago a letter was received by him at Austin, from that uncle, saying where he could be found, and asking him to pay him a visit. He set out at once, but stopped with us a few days. But there is one thing that puzzles me."

"What is that?" asked the desperado.

"How did Roy Berdan's uncle know that he had stopped at Hermosilla?"

"Oh, somebody passin' ther ranch may hev seen him thar, and carried ther news ter Coyote," was the reply.

"I don't know," said Inez doubtfully. "I won't say that it wasn't thus, but I feared a plot against him—against my friend Roy—when I came down to calm reflection."

"Who'd plot ag'in' him?" laughed Texas Trump. "A young man from Austin goin' ter see his uncle in Coyote ought ter hev no foes. My opinion is—"

Just what the Border Rattler's opinion was was disturbed by the galloping of a horse ahead, and all at once the animal was reined in before the twain.

"Major Ralph!" exclaimed Inez.

"By Jupiter! ther rancher ov Hermosilla!" ejaculated the *lano* sport.

"Yes," said the new-comer leaning forward with a pair of mad, flashing eyes riveted upon the girl, as at the same time his right hand closed like hawk talons upon her wrist. "I have found you at last, have I? What have I done to suffer this disgrace? Where is the viper, Roy? Show me his trail, and by heaven! I'll rid Texas of one infamous hound!"

Inez seemed to totter in the saddle.

"What has happened?" she cried. "I left a note behind explaining all. I could not see him go out upon the deadly *lano* alone. I—"

"Thar!" interrupted the rancher sternly. "Come home and I'll show you the infamous note you left. No explanations now. The infamy of your action fastens forever a stain upon Hermosilla! I'll get even with the dog!"

He dropped the wrist of the thunderstruck girl and wheeled toward the distant ranch.

"Oh, excuse me," he said turning suddenly upon Texas Trump. "Perhaps I owe you thanks for finding this young runaway in better hands than *his*. You are—"

"Laced Leon, they call me," was the answer. "I am from the northwest border, an' I called at ther ranch about sundown ter see you."

"Come along then. I'll see you thar. This night is the blackest one in my existence!"

There was no answer, and not another word was spoken until all three steeds were reined in before the ranch home, and Major Ralph assisted Inez from the saddle.

He hurried her into the house without ceremony, and up to her little room.

"Whar you left the accursed paper, I'll make you face it!" he cried. "Here it is. Now, deny that you did not leave it behind for me!"

With wildly beating heart but confident that she could explain the contents of the paper thrust into her hand, Inez stepped toward the lamp.

One look was enough.

"My God! I did not leave *this!*" she suddenly cried, turning upon the rancher. "I told the truth in the letter *I* left. This is an infamous forgery—a lie! Don't look at me in that manner. I would not lie to you. You are the best friend I have on earth. I—"

She ended with a shriek, and dropped senseless at the Texan's feet.

CHAPTER V.

THE WOLF SHOWS HIS TAIL.

THERE was a witness to this startling scene, and when Major Ralph the rancher lifted the unconscious girl and laid her on the bed, a dwarfish figure that had two serpent eyes crawled down the tree whose boughs almost touched the window of the boudoir.

"She'll know what Flippo's hate is one of these days," he chuckled. "I'm not goin' to stop hyer. No! she must get to the dregs in the cup first. Ha! my fine lady. The next man you drive away with a whip you'll first see that his name isn't Flippo."

Half an hour later Major Ralph reappeared suddenly to the man seated on the veranda.

"So you are Laced Leon?" he said looking straight into the *lano* sport's eyes. "Now tell me where you ran across my ward—tell me all about it."

For once in his life Texas Trump told the

truth, and was not interrupted during the narrative.

"Thar is some mystery here," said the rancher. "Inez never lied to me, yet I found when I came home a letter in her writing saying that she had gone off with a man named Roy. She now says she neither wrote nor left that letter."

Texas Trump took a whiff on his cigar before he spoke.

"Women ar' strange creatures," he said. "My experience is that some ov 'em won't do ter tie ter. Thet letter war in her handwritin', eh?"

"Yes."

"I wouldn't think she'd lie ter you."

"I don't want to think so," said Major Ralph.

"You must not," said a voice behind them, and the two men whirled to see Inez in the doorway. "The stars above will bear witness to the oath I take," she continued. "I swear in sight of Heaven that I never penned a line of that infamous note. The one I wrote was stolen and this one left in its place. I went to the *lano* to help protect Hermosilla's late guest. I believed that the letter he got was a decoy."

A singular smile appeared at the corners of Texas Trump's mouth, but his mustache adroitly hid it.

"You kin bet yer life that it war a decoy, an' it nearly succeeded, my ranch rose!" he muttered. "You struck pay dirt when you called that messenger from Camp Coyote a slick piece ov business. If that Mute Comanche hadn't come between, I'd hev won ther game."

The rancher was at the girl's side when she paused.

"Go up-stairs. We'll not talk about this again to-night," he said.

"Not until you have assured me that I am believed," was the answer. "You hate the young man from Austin. He is nothing to me more than a friend and a late guest. Time will come when the mystery of that forgery will be made clear. Woe to the villain if he falls into my hands!"

"He's been thar once," grated a little man who stood in the dark shadow of one of the trees near by. "I see that to strike you deep I must strike your late guest. I'm off for Camp Coyote."

The speaker glided from the spot and approached the stables.

Dodging into them he was lost to sight for a few moments and when he reappeared he led a horse by the bridle.

"I could make a sensation by exposin' the man on the porch. Major Ralph never dreams that he entertains Texas Trump, the Border Rattler, the coolest an' meanest sport that ever touched a trigger on ther *lano*. I know him wherever I see him. Laced Leon, eh? Play yer game, Texas. I'll play another part ov mine in Coyote."

Flippo the dwarf sprung to saddle, and the next moment dashed toward the borders of the *lano*, his destination Camp Coyote at the western end of its trails.

Meanwhile, Texas Trump as Laced Leon sat on the porch enjoying a fresh cigar. Inez had gone back to her room, and Major Ralph the rancher ill at ease and troubled had but little to say.

"I guess I'll be goin'," suddenly said the desperado. "You have no cattle to sell, you say? That war my mission hyer, an' I'm glad that I've been ov service ter yer in another way. I'm off for Coyote."

The rancher started at mention of the name.

He seemed to associate it at once with Roy Berdan.

"To Coyote?" he exclaimed. "Will you carry a message to the camp for me?"

"Sartainly, major."

The rancher went into the house, and seating himself at a desk, wrote as follows:

"HUGH:—

"If 'here is in camp a young man named Roy, find out all you can about him and let me know. This is important."

MAJOR RALPH."

"You will give this to Heavy Hugh," said the rancher, placing the letter in Texas Trump's hands.

The sport's eyes dilated, but he did not betray himself.

"Major," he said, "what ef a man ov my appearance should take a fancy ter yer ranch rose?" and Texas Trump drew his splendid figure to its full height and looked the rancher in the eye. "I've seen hundreds ov pretty women, major, but ther one under yer care takes ther linen off ther shrub. You'd not be bothered with findin' letters on ther table ef she war

Laced Leon's wife, an' she'd get a husband what 'd keep them Austin tenderfoots at a distance. It's a cl'ar case ov love at first sight, major. What d' yer say?"

With the assurance of his Satanic Majesty, Texas Trump kept his ground and waited for the rancher's reply.

Major Ralph seemed thunderstruck. He had been surprised many times during his adventurous career, but this one seemed the greatest of all.

What! Laced Leon in love with Inez?

"Struck yer kinder sudden, didn't I?" continued the impudent sport. "Mebbe I hed better hev preceded ther cyclone with a gentle zephyr; but it can't be helped now. Inez needn't go far from yer as Laced Leon's bride. She—"

"She can't become yours!" was the interruption. "The girl remains with me as no man's wife. Hermosilla Ranch is her home. I am her guardian."

"All right, major," said the cool sport. "I guess that's a refusal; leastwise, it looks that way around ther edges. I guess I'll hev ter fall back on a Greaser squaw."

"From Inez to a squaw?" flashed the rancher; and a mad stride carried him to the *lano* desperado. "By heavens! I allow no man to couple her with such a creature!"

"Yer don't, eh?" grinned the villain.

"I do not, and the man who does it ceases to be a guest of mine! Please to give me the message I would send to Camp Coyote. It need not go thar by your hands."

Texas Trump thrust his hand into an inner pocket and drew forth a paper which he flung at Major Ralph's feet.

"I didn't couple Inez ter ther Greaser woman," he said. "But by heavens! those Greasers make good wives sometimes."

"Thar!" was the stern response. "My ranch welcomes gentlemen, not roughs. Your braided jacket and laced sombrero give you away. Under them is a Texas ruffian. Thar stands your horse. Go!"

For a moment the stalwart scoundrel stood at the edge of the porch, and glanced like a tiger at the man who could match him. Major Ralph pointed to the steed while he spoke, and under his now cool exterior lurked the demeanor of a lion.

"Major—"

"Not another word, Laced Leon!" was the interruption. "You have said enough. I am master here. You unmasked yourself. Inez your wife? By heavens! I'd fling her to Roy first!"

The retort was a laugh by the *lano* sport that made the rancher's black eyes blaze.

He was not armed, and while the mad spell was on he sprung back into the house.

"Thar's 'shoot' in that man's optics," said Texas Trump to himself. "If I want ter play a cool game ter ther end, I must get out o' hyer."

It was a short leap from the porch to the saddle, and Texas Trump turned his steed toward the *lano*.

"Good-by, major, I'll see yer later!" he threw over his shoulder as he touched the horse with the spurs.

The next moment the owner of Hermosilla Ranch reappeared on the porch.

The old fire had not abated in his eyes, and the Winchester he carried in his hand told that the sport's safety was not on the porch.

A long stride, which was almost a bound, carried the rancher to the veranda's edge. The blood of his wild days had come back to his veins; the insult to Inez maddened him.

His searching eyes caught sight of the man riding through the very brilliant starlight. Texas Trump had not got far away.

The rifle struck the rancher's shoulder; it covered the cool sport; the finger of an old Vigilante was at the trigger.

"Let him go!" said a voice as a footstep fell upon the Major's ears and a hand fell upon the rifle and clutched it. "What has that man done to deserve death?"

"Enough!" growled the rancher trying to shake the rifle loose. "I won't repeat the infamous insult."

"But let him go."

"To give us trouble hereafter? He gave his plans away. He went off with a threat in his eyes. Let me tumble him from his saddle."

"No!" cried the girl clinging still to the rifle.

"Remember that Inez pleads for him."

"Very well. The day may come, girl, when you will wish you had let me touch the trigger. His cattle hunt is a sham. He wants a wife."

The girl uttered a cry of astonishment, and then burst into a laugh.

"Well, he'll never find one on Hermosilla."

Ran?" she cried. "They call him Laced Leon. I never saw him until to-night."

"Nor I, but the moment he showed up in his true character he resembled some one I have seen. Let me think. Where have I seen that man? It must have been long ago, in California perhaps."

"Or in Colorado," suggested the girl.

Major Ralph passed his hand over his forehead as if to clear his thoughts while Inez looked on and waited breathlessly for the result.

"I can't place him now; but I have seen him somewhere," said the Texan. "I'll get at it by and by, perhaps."

At this moment a few rods away a man stood up in his stirrups and shoo'k his fist at the hacienda.

"Refused an' driven off, eh?" he cried. "Ef Texas Trump fails ter git thar in ther end, major, bane 'im for a clam!"

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW DISGUISE.

"THAR'S no prouder man in New Mexico ter night than Heavy Hugh. Boy, yer don't know how I've hunted for a trace ov yer. I knew my sister had a child, but, until a few days ago, I didn't know for sartain whether that child war dead or alive. You look like her. I kin see her eyes in your head, an' your voice—Jehu! it is Lucy's ter a dot!"

The man who spoke thus occupied a three-legged stool in a small cabin, and the listener was a handsome young man who occupied a similar seat near at hand.

Heavy Hugh was one of the odd characters of Camp Coyote which lay near the western boundary of the *Llano Estacado*. He was about forty-five, rather dark, and a giant in stature. Quiet almost to moroseness, he had led many to believe that he was partially insane; but now his eyes fairly twinkled while he talked.

Roy Berdan's coming to Coyote seemed to have made him ten years younger.

There was no resemblance between the two thus brought together, yet, they were uncle and nephew, the young man being the child of Heavy Hugh's favorite sister.

The Mute Comanche had piloted Roy safely to camp after rescuing him from the revolver of Texas Trump, and without waiting to receive any thanks for his service had slipped away nobody knew whither.

It was the second night after Roy's arrival when Heavy Hugh declared that the meeting had made him the happiest man on earth.

A thousand questions about Roy's mother had followed the reunion, and the young Texan did not get to narrate his adventures until the second night.

"What! did you hev ter face ther droper ov Texas Trump?" cried Heavy Hugh. "We all know that *Llano g'lootan* he knows better than ter set foot in Camp Coyote in any capacity. I sent no letter ter yer at Hermosilla. While I war anxious ter fold Lucy's child ter my heart, I wouldn't hev torn yer from ther ranch rose."

"Then who invented the decoy?" exclaimed Roy.

"Texas Trump," was the answer.

"Why does he hate me?"

"I don't know, but ye'r' interferin' with a game ov his. Thar's more than one lasso gapin' for ther Border Rattler. Thar's a standin' notice in Coyote ag'in' 'im an' nobody knows it better than himself. When, you go back ter Hermosilla, Roy, I'll go along. Major Ralph an' I ar' friends. We war Vigilantes together when men needed rope in California. Hark! What fool's struck Coyote now?"

The two men attracted by the same noise went to the door together, and as it was opened they heard a man sing out in lively tones:

"I make no brags, gentlemen, but I'm a hustler from Hustlertown! I kin laugh longer, jump further an' sing more psalms than any saint in christendom! I'm no oil chromo; nor a long-lost Murillo, but I'm a pictur in a dandy frame! Whoopee! six feet in my boots an' a terror ter scales an' suspenders! Come around me, Coyotes ov Coyote Camp! Gaze upon this piece ov decorated anatomy an' wish ye war like me!"

"That man's a fool," said Heavy Hugh with a smile and a glance at Roy. "We don't have many such visitors. Let us take him in."

A crowd comprising more than one-half of the inhabitants of the camp had already found the new arrival, who stood on top of his saddle displaying his magnificent physique to all.

He had arrayed himself in a buckskin suit nearly new, and fantastically decorated. A fringed cape was one of the numerous luxuries he sported, and his boots were adorned with

tassels which shook when he moved. A large slouched sombrero, ornamented with a wide red ribbon, adorned his head covered by a great amount of black hair. His face was dark as a Mexican's, but cleanly shaven, which seemed to lend a strange and unnatural appearance to his eyes.

"A border fool sure enough," ejaculated Heavy Hugh, as he and Roy drew near to the man on the saddle. "We used to have these rovin' dandy-loafers among ther Sierra camps, but this is ther first one that ever hit Coyote. He's a model, ain't he? Look at that figure!"

"Shall I sing you a song, gents, er do yer want Captain Bottlejack's address to ther Piutes? Choose yer treat an' draw on this livin' treasury. I'm a pressed pippin from Eldorado's orchard."

"Give us a song!" called out a dozen spectators, eager for fun.

"All right, gents. Stand still, Morphine. I'm goin' ter make Coyote think that a mockin'-bird from Eden hez struck camp."

The horse needed no command to remain motionless, for he had not moved a limb since the halt, and a moment later the new-comer started off in a rollicking song which could have been heard in any quarter of the place.

He had a notably good voice, and knew how to use it, and it was seen from the first that his singing had captivated the denizens of Coyote. He sung the song through, accompanying the chorus with a dance on the saddle, and at the end was greeted with shouts of approval and uproarious laughter.

"Now, gents, Happy Hank will give you Captain Bottlejack's address ter ther Piutes," continued the man.

"I've got enough ov this," said Heavy Hugh in a whisper to Roy. "Ef you want ter hear more, stay an' take it all in. You know whar ther shanty is, boy; ther latch-string's out."

Roy had concluded to remain, and Heavy Hugh went back.

The boy had not watched the dandy close enough to see that more than once his eyes became fastened upon him. Happy Hank seemed just what he claimed to be—a roving free lance, who got his whisky for his antics in the silver camps, and who led an easy, idle and worthless existence.

The promised address of Captain Bottlejack to the Piutes was nothing great, judged from a literary standpoint, but the delivery pleased the crowd to such a degree that Happy Hank was invited to Coyote's best saloon, where it was proposed to pay for the entertainment in moist goods.

"Thar never war an offer that Happy Hank war known ter decline," laughed the sport. "Hevin' refreshed ther interior man, gents, I'll give yer some selections from Shakspear an' ther poets when I'll proceed ter show my jumpin' qualities."

"I can out jump him myself!" exclaimed Roy.

"You? then, by Jupiter! we'll hev a match!" cried a man at the youth's elbow. "Say—"

"No! I did not mean to speak aloud. I did so unconsciously," interrupted the youth catching the man's arm. "I don't want to be matched against that man."

"We'll do it anyhow!" was the reply. "Ye'r Heavy Hugh's nephew, an' a part ov Coyote already. You must become our champion. We'll back yer, Roy. Say, boys! Hyer's a man what says he kin out jump anything now in Coyote. I'll back 'im for luck!"

In an instant Roy found scores of eyes fastened upon him, and under the ordeal he blushed to the temples.

"Whar is he?—that youngster?" cried Happy Hank in derision as he took Roy in from head to foot. "Does he b'long hyer?"

"Yes," said the youth's self-appointed backer.

"Then I jump him as ther champion ov Coyote. Let me take 'im squarely in."

The camp's visitor jumped from the saddle and came up to the young Texan.

From the moment that he touched the ground Roy felt the influence of a pair of eyes that seemed to blaze while they regarded him. He drew himself up and stood the inspection in an admirable manner.

"When did you ever jump?" suddenly asked Hank.

"I haven't jumped in a match for three years," is the reply. "This trial is not of my own oosing. I mutteringly spoke aloud—"

"Oh yes; ther old tale ov modesty!" laughed the loafer. "I'll jes' take down yer comb afore we adjourn ter ther cock-tail department ov this camp. Ar' standin' jumps yer specialty?"

"Suit yourself," said Roy, carelessly. "The

match is not of my seeking, I say. I object to being made the champion of any camp."

"My forte is a runnin' jump."

"We'll test it, then."

The crowd drew off and prepared for the match. Roy took off his jacket and tossed it to the man who had announced himself his backer.

More than one exclamation greeted the young man in his shirt-sleeves. He was a perfect specimen of youthful manhood, a real athlete, and from that moment he had fifty friends and backers.

The night was one of those rich starlight ones found so often in the wild Southwest. No artificial lights were needed and the jumping line was easily seen when one was made in the ground.

Roy Berdan seemed confident of his powers, and when everything had been arranged a silver dollar was tossed up to see who was to jump first. Heads meant Happy Hank, tails, Roy.

"I open ther ball," said the dandy when the result of the toss had been announced. "Now, gents, you'll see some ov ther tallest air-cuttin' you ever took in."

He walked back from the line with an air of bravado, but not without a dark glance at his young antagonist.

All at once he sprung forward and left the ground at the line.

"Thar!" he said, recovering where he lit, and turning upon Roy and his backers. "Ther like ov that jump Coyote can't beat. Oh, I'm a daisy when it comes ter this bizzness."

Roy walked away with a smile on his lips.

"If I don't beat this bravo, I'll leave camp," he muttered.

The next moment he halted, turned suddenly on his heel, and sprung forward. He went through the air like a rocket, and the following second a wild yell announced that he had distanced the stranger.

A dozen excited men went forward to make sure of the distance, and another shout confirmed the young Texan's triumph.

"Beaten by five inches! Hurrah for Coyote!"

The face of Happy Hank grew dark, and a pair of baleful eyes glared at Roy.

"See here!" hissed Hank, reaching the youth's side. "I kin throw yer two best out o' three."

"I never wrestle," answered the Texan quietly.

"Oh, yer don't," sneered Hank, drawing back and smothering his rage. "Mebbe ye fight."

"No."

"Then I'd like ter see yer privately a minute. By Jericho! ye'r a dandy."

Before Roy could move, the beaten champion had put his arm through his, and was leading him away. The crowd looked wonderingly on.

Happy Hank's horse followed at his master's heels.

Wondering what communication his antagonist had to make, the young Texan permitted himself to be led beyond the nearest cabins.

Five, ten minutes passed away.

The crowd grew impatient, and at length several men ventured behind the cabins.

"Thar's nobody hyer! They're gone!" was the cry.

Gone!—Roy and Happy Hank?

A brief investigation proved this to be true. "Have I lost him already?" exclaimed the big man, who approached suddenly among the excited and swearing men. "Boys, that man warn't Happy Hank any more than I'm Stonewall Jackson! I know him now, when it's too late. Ther Mute Comanche baffled him ther other night an' he came ter Coyote for revenge."

"Who is he, Hugh?" cried the crowd. "Name ther hound!"

"Texas Trump!" said Heavy Hugh. "Roy has fallen inter ther clutches ov ther tiger that wants his blood!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE DESPERATE PLAY.

"HE out-jumped me ter get euchered in ther end! They don't beat this *Llano* rattler more'n once ther same night, eh, King, my boy?"

Texas Trump, still clad in the garments that had distinguished him as Happy Hank, leaned toward the half-breed boy who was riding over the plain at his side in the first light of a new day.

Behind the pair stretched a flat but not arid country, and far ahead a line of rough cliffs marred the evenness of the horizon.

"I don't see him," said the boy, looking back.

"I reckon yer don't," was the reply, accompanied by a laugh. "We've made a famous Mazeppa ov ther young Texan that stood be-

tween us an' ther bonanza. I'd like ter see Heavy Hugh stop ther hoss, or watch ther girl—ther ranch rose—find him sudden before her house. Oh, I'm a tiger with claws, King; you know that."

The half-breed nodded and grinned.

Yes, he knew the tiger and his claws. He had served the Border Rattler long enough to know him thoroughly, and in more than one rascally piece of work his hands had helped him.

"You know that I left Hermosilla Ranch before Major Ralph's rifle," continued Texas Trump. "I happened ter speak ov Greaser squaws in ther same sentence about Inez. It war a spark ter powder. He went off in a flash. I left thar as Laced Leon. Can I go back as Happy Hank?"

The half-breed boy had no doubt of it. He had seen Texas Trump play a hundred games successfully; he was a firm believer in the desperado's destiny; he could not fail anywhere.

"Wal, I'm goin' thar," the *llano* sport went on. "When a prize is worth playin' for you mustn't stop ter rest. Ter Hermosilla, King!"

The two riders touched their steeds with the spurs and galloped forward as the morning light grew stronger and the sun crept up the cloudless sky.

It was hours afterward when Happy Hank dashed up to Major Ralph's porch and doffed his sombrero to the man who came forward, eying him intently.

"Don't know Happy Hank, major?" cried the Rattler with an outburst of laughter. "Many's ther time I've seen yer among ther lords ov Austin an' ther money men ov Laredo. I'm one ov yer free lances, a daisy that's broke from ther hot-house, a flower on ther rampage in wild gardens.

"Give me a rope with an easy noose
An' I'm a king—heigho!"

The Texan made no reply until he had thoroughly scrutinized the man in the saddle.

The day was vanishing and the shadows of the tall trees near by were falling across the porch.

"Get down and have a cigar," said Major Ralph. "Have you crossed the plains?"

"Bet yer life ter invitation an' question!" said Happy Hank as he slipped from the saddle, and took the slender cigar extended by the rancher.

"This doesn't look like I went away from hyer ahead ov a rifle," he muttered under his breath. "Ef ye could look under my mask, major, I fancy that invitation as well as the cigar, would be postponed."

At this juncture and before the rancher could speak again, the rustle of a dress was heard, and the rose of the ranch appeared on the porch. At sight of the new-comer, she stopped suddenly and went back a step.

"I'm only Happy Hank," said the desperado. "I now know what makes Hermosilla Ranch famous everywhar. Major, is this peerless creature your—your daughter?"

"My ward—Inez," said the rancher.

"I know a song about Inez, but not this one, perhaps."

"Let us hear it!" cried the girl who had regained her composure.

It was evident that the girl had no high opinions of Happy Hank's musical abilities, and when she saw him throw his hat on the floor and clear his throat with several preliminary "ahems," she threw a quick smile at the Texan.

The song pitched in a rather high key but with a rollicking chorus, floated far from the hacienda.

Inez applauded and Happy Hank bowed his thanks.

"I b'lieve I could sing my way inter Paradise," he said to himself. "I wonder what King thinks, for he hears all behind the trees out on the knoll. Ther more I see of ther ranch rose, ther more I know she's worth playin' for."

The one song did not prove enough, another and still another followed, and the result of the strange introduction was that Happy Hank's horse was taken to the stables by a servant and he had accepted an invitation to remain all night.

"In your travels did you ever meet a fellow called Laced Leon?" asked the major.

"I've seen him once or twice. I don't fancy the fellow," was the reply.

"He's a ruffian of the first water—a man who knows that he is not wanted at Hermosilla. He was here but once; that was enough."

The two men now occupied the porch alone. Inez had retired and sat at her window that faced the undulating, *llano* and was wondering, perhaps, what had become of the young Texan

whose friendship had nearly cost her the love of Major Ralph.

Cigar after cigar was consumed by the two men, and night wore on.

Inez at last left her window and fell asleep in an arm-chair, for the night was too hot to seek the bed.

"Major, try one of Happy Hank's brand," said the desperado, producing from an inner pocket two peculiar and very handsome cigars.

Apparently, without making a particular selection, he handed one of the pair to the rancher who lit it and settled back in his chair to enjoy it.

What made Happy Hank watch him so from under his long black lashes? What made the desperado's eyes glitter like two mad stars?

Suddenly the rancher's tongue seemed to grow heavy. His sentences became confused and then disjointed. The atmosphere contained a peculiar, but not unpleasant odor.

"Beat me, beat Satan at his own game!" chuckled Happy Hank as he eyed the man in the chair. "Didn't Laced Leon say you could bake 'im for a clam ef he didn't get thar finally? Wal, he's thar, Major Ralph. They don't eucher this *llano* chick any more!"

He leaned over and touched the man apparently asleep in the chair. The touch was felt, and Major Ralph attempted to open his eyes, but the effort was too great.

"That's ther costliest cigar ever smoked in Texas!" continued the ruffian, bending over the now unconscious rancher. "Thar war a drug in it deadly enough ter make yer sleep till ther final judgment. Oh, I said I'd come back arter ther bonanza. I'm hyer!"

The next moment the *llano* rough turned toward the trees and sounded the peculiar whistle. A boyish figure appeared at the edge of the porch.

"Brazos," said Happy Hank, and the youth disappeared.

For five minutes longer the cool head stood over the man in the chair. Not a muscle of the rancher's frame was seen to move; he seemed dead.

All at once the figure of the boy came back, and glancing over his shoulders, Happy Hank saw the outlines of his horse.

"Now for ther bonanza," he ejaculated. "I play a game ter-night that ther Brazos kentry will never forget."

He dexterously slipped off his boots, and throwing them one by one to the boy, glided into the house.

With the noiseless tread of a cat, he went upstairs and stopped at the door that led into the girl's room. It stood ajar.

"Two minutes more, an' I'll be ther boss bonanza owner ov Texas," fell from his lips.

He pushed the door open and went in, but the next moment he stopped before the vision of beauty that slept in the arm-chair in the soft starlight.

Texas Trump stood there a little while, entranced. Remorse did not seize hold of him; the man was merciless.

Suddenly his hand darted forward, but fell gently upon the shoulder of the sleeping girl, yet the touch was enough to waken her.

"Heavens! you here—in my room?" she exclaimed, only prevented from leaving her chair by the hand that held her down.

"I am hyer, my ranch lily. No noise, ef yer please. I play deep hands when thar ar' big stakes. You ar' goin' with me."

"No, no! The major stands between me and violence."

"Ther major? I guess not! He's enjoyin' his eternal sleep over his last cigar," was the rejoinder. "No screamin' now. I won't stan' it, Inez. Come!"

The hand clutched the shapely shoulder, and Inez was lifted from the chair.

"Who are you? You must be more than Happy Hank. My God! I've seen those eyes before."

"Thar's little doubt ov that," laughed the ruffian. "An' you'll see 'em often, from now on."

Texas Trump went down the steps to the porch below, bearing with him the half-conscious beauty of the ranch.

It was the desperado's triumph.

He prevented her from seeing the figure reclining in the chair, and carried her straight to the horse where stood a half-breed boy with a pair of anxious eyes.

Texas Trump swung himself into the saddle, and then leaned toward his pard.

"Now do your part," he said. "Remember yer instructions, an' carry 'em out. Take that man inter ther house first. Then make sure work ov ther trap!"

King, the half-breed, turned toward the porch and Texas Trump rode off with his prize.

"It didn't take many plays for all," he ejaculated. "One deal at Camp Coyote, ther other at Hermosilla—that war all."

He did not stop until he had put two miles between him and the plundered hacienda. Drawing rein in a little hollow he waited apparently for some one.

"It takes him a long time," he said impatiently.

"Mebbe ther dusky devil failed."

At last the sky beyond the crest of the rise between him and the ranch seemed to flush crimson.

Texas Trump uttered an exclamation of joy and spurred his horse forward.

When he halted again he occupied the crest of a knoll from which was visible a raging fire about two miles away.

"Thar's nothin' like makin' sure work as yer go along!" he cried.

"What does yon fire mean?" exclaimed the girl held upon the saddle before him. "Heavens! it is Hermosilla! You have fired the ranch home."

"Wal, yes; why play a poor game when you hold a boss hand?"

Their eyes met.

"This may be your triumph, but wait till mine comes!" she said sternly. "You have added murder to the torch's work. For this deed there shall come a day of vengeance, and I pray Heaven that I may be spared to inflict the most terrible retribution!"

"You'll hev ter git up early in the mornin', my Texas pink," was the brutal reply. "A man what kin play two characters with success in a drama like this one, ar' no fresh."

He turned and looked at the increasing light, and his face grew full of triumph.

"Nerve my hand for vengeance, Heaven!" murmured Inez. "This demon must be Laced Leon and Major Ralph believed him to be the desperado known as Texas Trump. Whoever he is, he shall pay for this night's work!"

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

THE sun came up again to shine on a scene of desolation.

Where had stood the home of Major Ralph the rancher, smoked a heap of blackened ruins, and a few men stood around gazing mournfully at the sight.

These men were, for the most part, the usual attaches of the ranch, but there were not wanting among them others whose appearance denoted wealth—owners of neighboring haciendas.

Major Ralph was not to be seen, and the servants when questioned about him shook their heads.

"See here. We can't afford to be deceived about the major," said a big rancher cornering one of the herdsmen in the stable. "You fellows know whar he is. If he perished in his house we will make somebody sweat for this deed. What do you know? where is the major?"

"He has gone off," was the answer.

"Alone?"

"No. He took with him Jalisco Jack, his head herder."

"Did Inez go with him?"

"Heavens, no! He went to hunt her. It was a close shave for the major."

"How close?"

"The whole house seemed on fire when we discovered it. We were sleepin' in the stables. With many a shout, we rushed to the house, Jack at our head. Into it we went, thinking of the major and Inez. Just beyond the door Jack stumbled over the major in a chair an' unconscious. We carried him out, but the girl could not be found. Five minutes more and the fire would have caught Major Ralph. He acted like a madman when he came to in the garden. He raved about a man who had stopped at the ranch in the early part of the night—a primped-up ranch loafer who sung songs an' smoked the major's cigars. He hasn't been seen since."

"Could he have done it?" asked the stockman eagerly.

"I wouldn't doubt it. That's the opinion hyer. As I war sayin', ther major acted like mad. He recovered while we saddled Mars, his horse, an' off he went with Jalisco Jack. He saw the light of the hacienda whenever he looked back. That is all I know. If he finds the man who did it, hell's gates will open for him, boots an' all."

"I know him well enough to be certain that he would prefer to do his own trailin'," said the ranchman. "A deed like this must be followed by a swift revenge. The abduction of Inez is terrible enough, but the firing of the ranch is

greater still. If the major doesn't extinguish the fire-bug, we will."

"Give him a chance," was the answer. "Hello! who's come up ter ther house?"

The rancher stepped from the stable and looked toward the ruins of the hacienda.

The men there had surrounded a person on horseback who had evidently just come up, and when the rancher joined the group he saw a half-naked Indian in whose eyes already burned a revengeful light.

"It is the dumb Comanche, Silent Sam!" was the exclamation. "Set him on the trail, an' the fire-bug will be found."

Silent Sam had come up in time to see the last timbers of the once happy home fall in among the smoking ruins. He threw an inquiring look among the men, and a dozen hasten to tell him about the catastrophe.

"That's wind wasted, boys," suddenly cried one of the herders. "Don't yer know that ther red is a mute? Let me give him some sign language, that he may understand." And forthwith the herder inaugurated a pantomime which seemed to be understood by the Indian.

When he had finished, Silent Sam looked for a moment longer at the ruins, and then turned his horse's head toward the *llano*.

"Let him go," said several voices. "I'd sooner hev thet red on *his* trail than mine."

The Mute Comanche rode straight away, not once looking back at the scene behind him, and the men at the fire saw him disappear.

He seemed to know where to strike the trail he wanted to find; at any rate, he gave his horse the spurs and dashed through the dewy grass of the *llano*, seated like a born equestrian in the saddle, and with his eagle eyes seeing everything about him.

Meanwhile, there rode ahead of him and in the same direction two men who were undoubtedly master and man.

One was clad in the rich garments of the prosperous rancher, the other in half-buckskin, and wore the high boots of the herder, and a light but wide-brimmed sombrero.

The horses were moving in a southeasterly direction and close together.

Both men carried the lasso of the *llano* at their saddles, and were, moreover, well-armed for any and all emergencies.

Major Ralph and Jalisco Jack.

"Jack, I must trust much of this hunt to you," said the Texan, whose features still bore traces of the terrible night just past. "I am willing to swear that the man who did it all is Laced Leon, whom I believe to be Texas Trump, the Border Rattler."

"If he is the man, I know his haunt," said the herder, who, like his master, was stalwart and well built. "He may not go back to it after a swoop like this."

"If he does, we'll have him, eh, Jack?" exclaimed Major Ralph. "Where were my eyes last night that I could not pierce the disguise? I am certain now that the letter I found on Inez's table, when I got back to the ranch, was his work. I know now that she left one of a different kind; she has convinced me."

"I do not think so."

"Why, what do you know, Jack?"

"Only this. A short time after Roy left the ranch, called off by the message delivered by the dumb half-breed, I saw that dwarf dog Flippo come out of the house. You know what happened a few days ago?"

"No."

"Inez caught him in a low falsehood. He made love to Fanny, the housemaid, an' when she refused him, he spread a lie about her. Inez heard it, an' faced him. He denied at first, then laughed insultingly in her face, till she jerked a whip from my hand an' cut him across the face."

"She never told me about it," said the rancher in amazement.

"She might have done so in time. Flippo told her then and there, with blood streaming down his face, that he'd get even, an' we laughed till he went off in a rage."

Major Ralph was silent for a few moments.

"Then you think, Jack, that the forged letter was the dwarf's work?" he suddenly asked.

"It might have been. There is no person in Texas handier with a pen than this same humped lizard. I drew him from the Brazos once. I wish to heaven I had let him drown!"

"It will be worse than drowning if I catch him!" grated the rancher. "But how slow we are getting on. I could go like the storm, Jack."

Jalisco Jack smiled, looked at the rancher, and spoke to his horse.

"To the *llano* serpent's haunt!" said Major Ralph. "Remember that Inez is to be found, and the burning of Hermosilla avenged!"

The two steeds moved rapidly across the plain that stretched in unbroken beauty, as it seemed, to the horizon far away.

"Halt!" said Jalisco Jack, with a suddenness that startled the Texan.

"What is it?"

"Something on the plain yonder like a horse lyin' down," said the herder, pointing forward. "I see it move. It is a horse, sure enough!"

"Forward, then! It may be a clew. From the horse, we may strike the sport's trail."

Both men drew their revolvers as they rode toward the object noticed by the keen eyes of the herder.

On the *llano* everything awakens suspicion, and there, if anywhere in the world, forewarned must mean forearmed.

With eyes riveted upon the object in the grass, Major Ralph and Jalisco Jack rode cautiously forward side by side.

"Thar's a man with the horse!" suddenly exclaimed the head herder.

"I see him. He lies under the steed, helpless."

"He is tied to the animal!—a Texan Mazeppa, major!"

The caution of the two men ended there, and the next minute they leaped from their saddles and bent over a man who lay on the ground, lashed to a horse which had apparently fallen from exhaustion.

In an instant a knife was called into use, and Jalisco Jack cut the cords and dragged the man from under his steed, and laid him upon the soft, rich grass carpet of the *llano*.

"He's alive, thank fortune, major," exclaimed the herder, meeting the Texan's inquiring look. "Don't you know 'im?"

"No. He is strange to me."

"Ah, I recollect you warn't at home while he war at Hermosilla."

"What!" cried Major Ralph. "Do you dare tell me that—"

"This man is Roy Berdan!" finished Jack.

The Texan straightened and started back, fixing upon the unconscious man for a moment a look of rage.

"He's been badly treated, major," continued the herder, who was examining the *llano* Mazeppa. "These infernal ropes have cut almost to the bone, an' there has been a gag in his mouth. It's a wonder he isn't dead. I saw him twenty times while he war at Hermosilla waitin' for you. This is Roy Berdan."

Without speaking, Major Ralph came up and looked down into the youth's face.

"Make him speak. I want to know whose work this is," he said.

Jack was already at work with this object in view. A flask of brandy, which the *llano* traveler always carries, was placed to the young Texan's lips, and a portion of its contents forced down his throat.

The effect was electrical, for life seemed to come back to the youth.

Jalisco Jack passed his arm under his head and raised him gently. He gasped a moment and then drew a long breath.

"Are you Roy Berdan?" cried the rancher.

"That is my name. Ah, you must be Major Rogers."

"Yes. Who did this? Give us the name of the man who transformed you into a *llano* Mazeppa."

The fire of vengeance blazed up in the young Texan's eyes before he spoke.

"If I do you must not pay him back for me," he said. "I do that myself. The villain who did this calls himself Happy Hank, but he is Texas Trump!"

The rancher and his head herder uttered a strange cry together.

"I could have guessed it," said Jalisco Jack. "You don't know what that same devil did last night."

"He didn't harm Inez, eh?"

"If he has, I'll toss him to the vultures!" cried Major Ralph. "I am goin' to do that anyhow. A few hours ago, Roy Berdan, I would have shot you on sight. Now, sir, here is my hand that we are friends."

"But what has happened?" asked the young man.

"Hermosilla hacienda is in ashes and Inez is in Texas Trump's clutches."

Roy Berdan looked thunderstruck.

If Texas Trump had a particular haunt hidden from the knowledge of man, it was likely that he would take his beautiful prisoner thither.

He durst not show her within the pale of civilization; the success of his game would warn him to give the Texan towns and the New Mexican silver-camps a wide berth. Of course he would be hunted, for he could not suppose that his swoop would go unpunished if man could strike.

The light of the burning hacienda told him that King, the half-breed boy, had accomplished the task assigned him, and when he turned his back upon it, he felt assured that he had nothing to fear from Major Ralph.

If Jalisco Jack knew his haunt as he told the rancher that he did, woe to the desperado who had masqueraded under several names.

The sun as it went down on the day succeeding the plundering of the Texan ranch saw a man leading a horse over a rough trail in one of the roughest portions of the *llano*.

"I guess they won't find me whar thar ar' no trails," said this man to himself in audible tones. "This is the haunt which no man has seen. Ther eagle has passed it by, an' hyer I kin keep my bonanza till I kin make a successful break for ther future."

The man who spoke did not look like Happy Hank whose songs had been applauded at Camp Coyote and Hermosilla Ranch, yet he was that very person.

A short bristly beard was starting out over his face, and he could have entered more than one camp where Texas Trump was well known and not been recognized. He was mistaken, however, when he said that his present whereabouts were not known.

If he had been enabled to look some distance behind him he might have seen gliding from rock to rock with the movements of a panther approaching its prey, a figure dwarfish in size and hideously ugly.

"Texas Trump didn't come hyer alone," said this person. "What meant that bit o' lace I found on the ground this afternoon? Don't I know that it came from her sleeve—from the dress of the girl who put the black whip across Flippo's face when he talked about Fanny of the ranch? Inez is hyer. She is Texas Trump's prisoner. Now the question is: Whar is she?"

Texas Trump might have gone back and surprised this trailer, but the last man he thought of then was this very Flippo, Inez's bitter enemy.

He continued to lead the horse forward by the bridle, and did not pause until in the loneliest part of the elevated land.

Flippo came on to within a short distance of the sport and watched him with glittering eyes and overpowering impatience.

"I'm glad I didn't go to Camp Coyote," he said. "If I had gone ther I would not have found Texas Trump. Roy is out o' ther way, anyhow. Ther hoss that dashed past me in the starlight carried a Mazeppa whom I recognized at a glance. I hev but ter watch you, Texas Trump, ter show Inez ag'in that ther blow she dealt Flippo is not forgotten."

The sun crept lower and lower, and Texas Trump showed no signs of obliging the dwarf by quitting his post.

Was he waiting for some one?

If he was, who was likely to come to the cool desperado now?

"I've got as much patience as you have, Texas," muttered Flippo, as he watched. "I kin stan' hyer till I die ov old age ef you won't move. I am too near Inez ter leave yer ter yerself, Texas Trump."

From the spot where the *llano* rascal stood could be seen the country lying on every side, and Flippo was not long determining why the position had been sought.

The plains were darkening as the sun crept toward the horizon, and the rocts about the lone desperado cast his body in shadow. He looked like a brigand guard, or an eagle watching the nest from an elevated peak.

Flippo seemed to grow into a statue of stone while he watched the sport.

More than once he saw Texas Trump shade his eyes with his joined hands and scan the ground below. Far away on his right was Camp Coyote, the abode of Heavy Hugh and his pards; eastward was Hermosilla.

At the end of two hours he moved and leaped down from the rock he had occupied.

Grasping the bridle again with a quick oath, he turned toward the spot occupied by Flippo and approached.

The dwarf compressed his body into the smallest possible space behind the rock that screened him, and held his breath.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BORDER RATTLER'S TRIGGERS.

THAT vast tract of country known as the *Llano Estacado* has hundreds of wild trails, and a thousand hiding-places, which neither the scent of the fox nor the vision of the eagle can ferret out.

"It was no stationary object. I've haunted ther *llano* too long to be fooled," said Texas Trump. "The man that kin trail me must hev ther scent ov a bloodhound. It isn't ther major. I left him ter King's mercies. It can't be ther boy. A hoss 'll be carryin' his skeleton over ther *llano* before long."

He was already past Flippo, but the dwarf caught these words, and a moment later he was gliding after the Border Rattler with the same noiseless tread that had before marked his progress.

Suddenly Texas Trump turned a sharp bend in the way, and Flippo halted. It might not do to go forward too suddenly, and he held back five minutes before he pushed on.

"Gone! I war a fool!" grated the dwarf when he discovered that Texas Trump was not to be found. "I ought ter be blown ter pieces. I'd give a hundred dollars for a kickin' machine ov forty-horse power."

The little man was in a rage at himself; he had let the sport of the border give him the slip.

For more than an hour he hunted for the lost trail with no success. In vain did he get down and examine the path in the light of the stars that sprinkled the firmament once more with lamps.

"I suppose I'll hev ter hang up somewhar an' wait till mornin'," he said, at last. "Fortunately, I know something about this place. I've been hyer before, but I don't pretend ter know it as Texas does. It may hev a thousand hidin'-places an' I not know one ov 'em. But give me a glimpse ov that galoot ag'in an' I'll warrant that he'll not escape me."

Flippo turned back and went away in no happy mood.

"Hello! what war that?" he suddenly ejaculated. "It isn't possible that Texas has got ahead ov me."

No, Texas Trump was not ahead of the dwarf, as he soon discovered, for when he went forward again he was suddenly seized at the collar and jerked from the ground.

"Jehosaphat! hades an' horns!" exclaimed the astonished Flippo, trying to get a glimpse of the owner of the hand that had seized him. "I've been in traps before, but this one has ther quickest spring I ever saw. Who holds me?"

There was no reply, but the dwarf was twirled around until his little eyes, starting almost from their sockets, looked into the face of an Indian on horseback!

"Silent Sam, by all that's holy!" continued Flippo. "I guess it's no use ter beg for mercy from you, for they say ye'r deaf as a post. You kin see, though, that I want loose. Jehu! Comanche, don't hold me that way. My neck ain't gutta percha."

Not a muscle of the copper-colored face relaxed, and the vise-like grip that held Flippo suspended in mid-air did not loosen in the least.

"Ef ye'r holdin' me for news, ye've got the grip that'll fetch it out," the dwarf went on. "By Jove! ef ye hed ears, Silent Sam, I could tell yer that Texas Trump an' ther ranch rose ar' among these rocks, that I've stumbled on ther *llano* serpent, but that I lost 'im awhile ago."

Did he see a new glitter come into the Mute Comanche's eyes while he spoke?

"Let me go. I can't tell yer anything because yer can't hear," said Flippo. "Hang me, ef I wouldn't sooner be squeezed in a vise. Ye war born with a grip that'd crush quartz."

As if the Comanche understood, Flippo was suddenly jerked forward and held to the blanket which the red-skin rode instead of a saddle.

"So," said a voice at his ear. "So, you have seen the serpent of the *llano*?"

If the hand of the Comanche had not held Flippo he would have been knocked from the horse by astonishment.

"Jupiter! when did you get your tongue back?" he cried.

"Flippo never mind that," was the reply. "Whar did he lose the *llano* rattler?"

"It makes little difference whar. You've found him now!" exclaimed a voice before Flippo could reply.

With the last word there stepped into the rocky trail a desperado of splendid figure, and in each hand that went up was a revolver.

"When the tiger hunts his hunters, look out!" the same voice continued and two quick shots followed.

Flippo dropped from the Indian's hands and staggered away, and Silent Sam pitched forward on his steed's neck!

CHAPTER X.

FLIPPO LOSES A PLAY.

"FOUND, but not caught, my daisies, ha, ha!" laughed the man who had delivered the quick and startling shots. "The dwarf ov ther hacienda is dead enough, an' I'm not so sart'in that the hoss carried off a corpse."

Texas Trump went forward and found Flippo one of his victims lying across the path, dead enough to all appearances.

Silent Sam's horse had carried him from the scene of surprise, and the *llano* sport turned his attention to the dwarf.

"I don't miss when I shoot for a bonanza like ther rose ov Hermosilla," he ejaculated. "How this deformed viper discovered that I war hyer is a mystery to me, but I'm thinkin' it's ther costliest diskivery he ever made."

He picked the dwarf up and carried him from the spot nor halted until he stood on the fringe of a chasm.

"Ther vultures will find yer, Flippo!" he said raising the dwarf above his head. "I can't afford ter hev even dead men at large among these rocks."

He was about to cast Flippo from him when a strange cry issued from his throat, and he lowered the body with curiosity in his eyes.

"Not dead, eh?" Texas Trump exclaimed, looking into the dwarf's face. "Mebbe you kin give me ther opposition lay-out. Come, Flippo, tell me whar you ran across ther Mute Comanche."

"Not unless I'm ter hev my liberty," was the answer. "Nothin' for nothin', Texas Trump."

The desperado laughed strangely and advanced again toward the edge of the cliff from which he had stepped at the dwarf's first cry.

"Nothin' for nothin', hey?" he said. "Very well, Flippo; that suits me ter a T. Down yer go ter ther vultures that will come at daylight."

"Hold! I'm not ready ter be served raw for the winged wolves of the *llano*!" cried Flippo.

"All right; show sense and talk it."

The dwarf was lowered once more, but was not released, and he saw the cold glittering eyes of the Border Rattler fixed upon him.

"You war huntin' me?" said Texas Trump.

"You an' ther red?"

"Not together. I didn't dream ov seein' that Injun hyer. I war in his grip before I knew of his presence."

"War he alone?"

"Yes."

"Ov course he didn't tell yer anything, because—"

"By heavens! that red kin talk," interrupted Flippo. "It nearly took my breath when I heard him talk. He's no mute."

"He's played it uncommon fine for years," said Texas Trump. "Why has he done so?"

"You'll have ter ask him."

"Dead men never impart information," answered the sport with a grin. "You did not see 'im tumble forward on his animal's neck when I touched ther trigger."

"If I hed that red on my trail I wouldn't be satisfied till I knew he war dead."

"What! don't yer think I've finished him?"

"I would want ter know."

"Ther dwarf is right," said Texas Trump to himself. "I must follow the red-skin. My game will be continually interrupted as long as that Comanche lives. But I must first attend to this serpent."

Then he turned to the captive in his clutches, and said, with a laugh:

"I'm goin' ter gratify yer curiosity, Flippo. I shall show you ther face of an old acquaintance."

The dwarf tried to keep calm, but betrayed his eagerness by a start.

Still clutching him in a manner that precluded all possibility of escape, Texas Trump started back.

Flippo had spoken in time to save himself a terrible tumble through space, but a hard fate might yet be in store for him. He believed that Texas Trump intended to conduct him to Inez, yet he could not see the desperado's motive for doing so.

The *llano* sport carried his captive down the winding trail that led among the rocks and stopped at last in a wild region which imagination could easily people with caves.

Plunging into a narrow passage which was dark, Texas Trump halted suddenly and lit a match. He held the little light above his head while he advanced again, and after a while, came to another sudden halt.

"I've fetched you an old acquaintance, Inez," he said as a young girl came forward with a torch in her hand. "Stick your torch in the wall an' entertain him till I come back."

Flippo found himself in the presence of Major

Ralph's ward, the woman he hated and the beautiful creature whose writing he had counterfeited with almost direful results.

Texas Trump was already gone, and he stood alone in the presence of Inez, of Hermosilla.

"Ef I play this thing well, I'll thank Texas for havin' brought me hyer," he chuckled to himself. "I'm not at all hurt, I guess. The bullet merely grazed my head an' rendered me senseless for a few moments. It's ther luckiest shot I ever saw. Thanks, Texas. Through your courtesy, I've found the rose of the hacienda.

Inez who had already secured the torch in a crevice of the wall was gazing at the dwarf with eyes full of indignation.

"Don't look at an old friend in that way," said Flippo, advancing a step. "I played a shrewd game ter get hyer, an' all ter help you, Inez."

"To help me?—you?" was the response.

"Why not?"

"I would scorn help at your hands. You know how I despise you."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not hyer ter talk about that," said Flippo, with a wave of the hand. "Ef a plank war thrown ter me, a drownin' man, I wouldn't ask who threw it. I am hyer for business. You want ter go back ter Hermosilla, ter ther major—"

"Does he live?" cried Inez, springing upon the dwarf. "Did they rescue him alive from the flames?"

"From what flames?" asked the dwarf, astonished.

"Do you not know? Then you did not come from Hermosilla. Freedom is dear to me, Flippo, but it cannot be accepted from the hand that offers it."

The dwarf almost recoiled a step.

"Here's a pretty go," he said. "You prefer Texas Trump ter Hermosilla. All right. Take ther *llano* rattler, then."

He stepped back as if about to depart, but the next second the girl darted forward, and her hand closed on his arm.

"I more than suspect you of one of the most dastardly deeds I can imagine," she said. "The lie Major Ralph found in my boudoir when he came back, emanated from your brain. Don't deny it. Your countenance already betrays you. This is your revenge for the scar my whip left on your face. Now, do you think I would accept liberty at your hands, viper? No! I'd sooner die in Texas Trump's clutches."

"Oh, you're a stubborn one!" grinned the dwarf. "Mebbe you'd like to accept freedom from ther dead man playin' Mazeppa ter-night somehow on ther *llano*."

"What do you mean?"

"Thet rouses yer, eh? Didn't I see a hoss carryin' a dead man across ther plains, an' when I saw ther corpse, didn't I know that ther youngster would never see uncle Hugh ov Camp Coyote?"

Inez uttered a wild cry and dropped Flippo's arm. "Heavens! you do not mean that the dead Mazeppa is Roy Berdan?" she exclaimed.

"Thet's about it," was the answer.

Color left the girl's face; she seemed about to reel and fall.

"Is it your work, Flippo?" she suddenly cried. "Did you send him adrift on the *llano* in that terrible predicament?"

"No."

"Whose work was it?"

"I could guess," laughed the dwarf.

"Texas Trump's?"

"Ther Border Rattler's."

"Was he dead?" asked Inez.

"Didn't I say I saw a corpse tied ter a hoss? Dead? Ov course! Now, won't yer accept liberty from Flippo? Think ov ther hands that hold yer. Ther youngster war yer friend, I know. Mebbe I've said an' done things ag'in yer, Inez, which, in cooler moments, I'm willin' ter take back. I curse yer whenever I see ther scar yer whip left, but that doesn't prevent me from helpin' yer out o' this trap."

A short silence followed the dwarf's appeal. He looked into the girl's face and tried to guess her decision in advance.

"Not at your hands," she said firmly. "I shall never purchase freedom with coin of that sort."

"Ye'r durned independent!" blurted the dwarf his eyes glittering like a serpent's. "I hope Texas Trump will keep ther nippers on yer an' make yer a poker-queen in some wild camp till yer hate yerself. Yes, I wrote ther letter ther major found. It riled him, eh? Thet war in return for ther whippin', Inez. You hev ter crush Flippo as ye'd crush a snake ter keep him under. With ther major dead an' Roy Berdan scourin' ther *llano* like a ghost, Texas Trump

ar' likely ter win all his games. Good-night, my ranch flower. In ther hardships ter come, curse ther hour when yer refused ther freedom Flippo offered."

"You are not to go!" cried Inez clutching the dwarf's arm again. "I was to entertain you till he came back. I shall do this, an' when he comes, though I hate him, Flippo, I will throw you to him. More than that: I'll tell him all!"

Flippo grated his teeth and struggled for a moment, but found that he could not break from Inez's grasp.

"It'll be all day if she keeps Flippo hyer till Texas Trump comes," he said to himself. "Ther *llano* sport won't find ther Mute Comanche; he will come back in a passion. I'm in hard luck. Heavens! can't I help myself out?"

He ceased to struggle and quieted down.

"I want ter see Texas Trump myself," he said to Inez. "You needn't hold me till he comes. Thar war a time, girl, when you had a pretty good opinion ov Flippo."

"Hush!" said the girl. "I hate myself for ever thinking well of you."

"That's pleasant," grinned the dwarf.

"As for Texas Trump ever making me queen of any camp, let not that trouble you. I assure you, Flippo, that that is one of the impossibilities. I have seen Hermosilla in flames; know whose orders destroyed the old home. Me Texas Trump's wife! Don't let that thought lose you any sleep."

The girl ceased rather suddenly, as if a noise had fallen upon her ears, and Flippo turned toward the corridor and listened.

"Yer master, Texas Trump," he said, smiling, as Inez took the torch from the crack and moved forward.

He watched her with eager eyes, fully expecting to see the well-known figure of the Border Rattler; but in this he was not gratified.

Inez went down the corridor some distance with the torch in her hand.

All at once it was struck against one of the walls, and the light disappeared.

"What does that mean?" ejaculated Flippo.

He heard no noise, no sound of footsteps, though he waited ten minutes.

"The girl is gone," he said at last. "She slipped from my hands like an eel. What ef Texas Trump should come back an' find me alone hyer? Foller Inez!—that's ther programme!"

The next moment he was hurrying down the narrow passageway, and just as he stepped into the starlight he was grasped by the throat and lifted clear of the ground.

"Jehosaphat! into ther devil's hands ag'in!" he cried, as he gazed into the face of the Border Rattler.

CHAPTER XI.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

"WAL, I missed ther Mute Comanche, but I've got back in time ter nab youl" laughed Texas Trump, as he held the alarmed Flippo clear of the ground in the starlight. "So you've given Inez ther slip? I'll jes' take yer back ter her, that's all."

The dwarf made no reply; indeed, there was a hand at his throat, and it would have been difficult for him to have spoken intelligibly.

He was dragged back into the cavern with very little ceremony, and the Rattler soon discovered that Inez was gone.

Like a maddened tiger, he whirled upon Flippo, and in thunderous tones demanded to know where the girl was. Of course, the dwarf did not know.

For some moments his very existence hung upon a very slender thread. He protested that he knew nothing, and the girl's strange disappearance he narrated with many asseverations of its truthfulness.

The maddened *llano* sport finally believed.

"She can't get away," he said. "This piece of rock-land is elevated a hundred feet above the main plain an' I know every foot of it while to her it is strange. In the first place, Flippo, it is my duty to dispose of you."

"For heaven's sake—"

"No baby act hyer!" broke in the sport. "I'm not goin' ter shed a drop o' yer blood. Come along! Thar's a part o' this underground palace you hev never explored."

Flippo would have resisted if resistance had promised any benefits, but he saw no leniency in Texas Trump's eyes, and with lips stubbornly compressed he was dragged from the spot.

"This cave has a charnel hole which I think you would like to explore," continued the desperado laughing as he dragged the dwarf on. "I have never explored it myself. I leave that

for you, Flippo. You shall be furnished with matches. Ah! hyer we ar'."

Flippo looked about him in the light afforded by the matches that burned in Texas Trump's hand and saw a yawning pit large enough to receive the body of a man.

"It's about ten feet ter ther bottom of ther unknown pit," said the sport as he crammed a number of matches into the dwarf's pocket. "I'll take you by the neck, Flippo, an' drop yer down easily—thus."

The dwarf would have shrunk from the ordeal, but he was lowered into the hole despite all power of resisting, and when the desperado's grip loosened, he dropped several feet and found himself in utter darkness.

"This means death by starvation," said the dwarf. "By the eternal stars! if ever I do get out o' this place I'll make Texas Trump wish he had never seen sunlght! A pit an' a grave, eh? We'll see about that!"

Taking hope for a moment, Flippo took out some matches and struck them on the first wall he found.

The Border Rattler had already disappeared—gone back no doubt on hunt of Inez, and the deformed had the exploration to himself.

If the cavern had no outlet, then a death by starvation; if it gave him liberty, woe to Texas Trump!

We shall follow the *llano* desperado.

Texas Trump seemed confident that he had cooped the dwarf up securely when he went back to find the trail of the girl who had slipped through his fingers in a manner he did not like.

The reader will recollect that he had returned to the cave from an unsuccessful hunt for the mute Comanche whom he had tumbled forward on his horse's neck with a bullet.

He did not think that Silent Sam might have found Inez, but in the corridor near the outward mouth of the cavern he made a discovery that opened his eyes.

In the dust near one of the walls was a footprint which was neither his nor Flippo's.

"Somebody is playin' ag'in' me!" ejaculated the Border Rattler while he gazed at the track. "The girl was met hyer by some one. By Jehu! this makes a new trail, an' I'll make it a bloody one."

He could follow the track to the rough path that wound like a serpent through the brilliant starlight; there, among the rocks, it was lost.

Texas Trump stood nonplussed like a man who sees a cherished prize about to slip from his grasp.

"Am I ter lose Inez arter playin' the role of Laced Leon an' Happy Hank for her?" he exclaimed. "Must I lose ther livin' bonanza an' go back ter ther lasso life along ther frontier? Not by a thousand miles! I must get a new hand—that's all! that's a new role for this *llano* chick ter play. Thank fortune, he made this haunt a mask shop for a bad day."

Once more he went back to the cavern, and twenty minutes later he emerged disguised as a cattle-hunter in dark gray overalls, heavy hat, big boots that reached to his knees, whip, lasso, and cattle brand.

A false black beard that completely changed his facial appearance gave him the air of the person he personated, and the keenest eyes could not have seen Texas Trump behind the new disguise.

Mounting his horse upon which he had placed a saddle of the peculiar pattern affected by cattle-hunters, he rode leisurely to the eastern boundaries of the rocky eminence, and looked down upon the plain stretching toward the dark horizon.

The night was wearing away, and another day was not far distant.

Texas Trump dismounted and led his horse while he carefully inspected the trail leading toward the east.

More than once his sharp eyes detected something that kindled them with indignation, and half a mile out on the plain he sprung up and went back to his horse.

"I hev no doubt of it now!" he cried. "I didn't kill that Injun for all. The boss I've followed thus far has lately left ther rocks. I've tracked him by degrees from near ther underground palace whar I saw Inez last. Ther girl has fallen back inter ther hands ov ther red. Flippo says he kin talk. By heavens! he'll find his tongue, if Texas Trump runs him down."

On, on through the early morning hours went the Border Rattler. Every now and then he would dismount to make certain that he was still on the right trail. Nothing daunted him now.

"Don't I know that ther red ar' breakin' for Hermosilla?" he said to himself. "Thet proves that he's got ther girl. Give me a Comanche for cunnin', and Texas Trump ter beat 'im at last."

Morning found the Border Rattler far from the rock pile and fairly adrift on the *llano* with his face turned toward the ranch he had despoiled. Cool determination and bloodhound pertinacity looked out of his eyes, though nobody would have dreamed that the man in the saddle was the curse of the border.

"Hello! what's that ahead?" suddenly cried Texas Trump, drawing rein and standing erect in his stirrups.

Far ahead was a dark object that seemed to possess motion, and a long look with shaded eyes told the Rattler that it was approaching.

He looked anxiously for some minutes, and at last discovered the sight to be three horsemen.

"I'll face 'em," he said. "Twill give me a chance ter try my new disguise. I'll see what they think ov Maverick Mark, on his way ter ther State arter cattle."

Texas Trump settled back into the saddle and rode forward again.

Every minute lessened the distance between him and the three men who had also seen him. They kept close together and seemed anxious to join him, and the desperado watched them with a pair of keen eyes.

"Bake me for a clam!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Why didn't King, my half-breed boy pard, do his duty? One o' those men is Major Ralph ov Hermosilla, er I'm a Greaser! Jehu! I've got ter play Maverick Mark down ter a hair now. That fellow at his left is his boss herder, Jalisco Jack. I'd know him anywhere. Who is ther third chap? I can't place him yet."

The two parties were not more than five hundred yards apart now. The three suddenly galloped forward at a brisk gait, and when near him, Texas Trump felt a thrill pass over his frame.

"Thar's my *llano* Mazeppa, too!" he ejaculated. "Ye'r ther last man I expected ter see alive, Roy Berdan. What would yer give ter know that ye'r about ter meet ther man who euchered ye in Camp Coyote?"

A meeting was unavoidable, and at length Texas Trump drew rein and awaited the three men.

"Hello! gents," he cried tipping back his sombrero. "Yer see before yer Maverick Mark on a cattle-hunt toward Texas. What's ther show for stock in ther Brazos ranches?"

The three vengeance-hunters sat before the cool-head of the *llano*, and Major Ralph replied that cattle were plenty in the territory mentioned.

"Thet strikes me, gents," said the false Maverick Mark. "Which way ar' ye bound for?"

"We're huntin' ther biggest rascal that ever filled a saddle," said Jalisco Jack.

"A stampeder, eh?"

"Worse than that," grated the rancher, his brow darkening. "I am Major Ralph Rogers of Hermosilla Ranch. The man we hunt is Texas Trump, an' woe to the fire-bug an' girl-stealer if we catch him!"

"The *llano* shall witness the drama of a headless Mazeppa if we find the fiend!" flashed Roy Berdan, whose dark eyes were riveted upon Texas Trump while he spoke. "Look here!" and the young man held out his wrists to the sport. "Those welts were made by his infernal ropes. I have been his Mazeppa. He shall yet be mine!"

"Blood for blood—that's ther unwritten law ov ther southwest border," said Texas Trump. "I wish I could put yer on track ov this *llano* fox."

"Thanks, I know you would if you could," Major Ralph responded. "We are equal to the situation, though. I have hunted men before, an' I cannot recall a single failure."

"Look yonder!" exclaimed Jalisco Jack, and his arm pointed toward the northwest. "Thar come two horses, an' by Jupiter! I'll stake my life ag'in' a lasso that one ov 'em carries Silent Sam. Thar's no man livin' that sits a hoss like that dumb Comanche."

Texas Trump who had already turned his head was staring at the approaching people discovered by Jalisco Jack.

"Jalisco Jack is right," he said under his breath. "Thar comes ther Mute Comanche, an' his pard is Inez!"

Major Ralph made the same discovery at precisely the same time.

"Inez!—Inez!" he exclaimed, carried away with joy. "I can throw Hermosilla at that silent red-skin's feet!"

He gave his horse the spurs with the utter-

ance of the last word, and the next moment he was riding like the wind toward the girl.

Texas Trump bit his lips madly.

"Let 'em wait an' see Maverick Mark's hand!" he hissed. "I could ram thet infernal Comanche inter ther ground. Somewhar back thar I lost ther trail, but fortune has found Inez for me anyhow."

Meanwhile, the Texan rancher had reined in his horse between the Indian and his companion, and Texas Trump was compelled to witness the embrace that followed.

"Thar ar' four more eyes ter inspect Maverick Mark," he muttered. "I call myself safe. Major Ralph, Roy an' Jalisco Jack hev failed ter penetrate ther mask. I'm not afraid ter face Sam an' ther girl."

He did not have to wait long for the ordeal, for Major Ralph soon came back, riding beside Inez, and Silent Sam's eyes were fastened on the *llano* rattler.

"I'm all hunky!" murmured Texas Trump. "Ther keenest scouter ov ther *llano* fails ter recognize me."

CHAPTER XII.

RUN DOWN.

HAVING found Inez again, Major Ralph was willing to turn back to the desolated ranch. Jalisco Jack, the Indian and Roy were anxious to move forward and hunt the Border Rattler down, and after a short consultation, in which Maverick Mark said a few words, it was decided that both should be done.

Major Ralph and Inez, accompanied by the masked sport, turned their horses' heads toward Hermosilla, while the three vengeance-hunters galloped toward the haunt far to the west.

"Ef I'm not havin' things my own way, shoot me for a parson!" ejaculated Texas Trump, as he rode along beside Inez, who did not for a moment suspect the truth. "Half an hour ago I wouldn't hev given much for my chances; now, I'm on top ag'in. They don't keep this *llano* daisy under the grass long at a time. Those fellows won't find Texas Trump; they may un-earth Flippo."

It was a long ride back to the borders of Hermosilla Ranch, and when the place was reached, an unexpected sight greeted the desperado's eyes.

Near the spot where the hacienda had stood, a small but comfortable building had been erected by the quick-handed servants and adjacent ranchers, and a loud cheer greeted the return of Major Ralph and Inez.

"You see what the villain did," said the Texan, directing Texas Trump's attention to the ruins of the ranch home. "My herders and neighbors have put up a temporary shelter, which will give way for a handsome home by and by. My last orders to Jalisco Jack and his friends were that the *llano* fiend, if captured, shall be brought here for punishment. What will I do with him? I'll hang him to one of the blackened beams of Hermosilla Ranch!"

Texas Trump did not quail at these words.

"That wouldn't be too good for him, major," he laughed coolly. "But you do think the boys will find him?"

"If he is living he will be found," said the Texan quickly. "I don't know anything about Roy's hunting qualities, but I'd stake much on those possessed by Jalisco Jack and the Indian. Find him? They will, sir, and where he did his dirtiest work Texas Trump shall stretch a lasso."

Maverick Mark was invited to make himself at home at the ranch, and he accordingly added his horse to those in the ample stables. He was in no hurry to inspect the ranches of the Brazos in his search for cattle, and he would rest awhile at Hermosilla.

Inez was glad to get back to the old ranch, and more than once as the hours flew by she cast longing eyes westward with an eager hope that the three hunters would soon return.

"Look! we are going to have visitors," suddenly exclaimed the girl appearing before the house where Major Ralph and Maverick Mark were smoking in the last rays of the sun.

"A lot of herders for the *llanos*!" cried the rancher. "Ah! we may hear from the three hunters. They may even be in the party."

Maverick Mark sprung to his feet and fixed his eyes on the party riding in a gallop toward the house.

"Ther pards ov Camp Coyote. I'd know 'em without a light," he growled. "What hev I ter fear, though? I hev passed inspection under ther keenest eyes on earth. Heavy Hugh an' his pards can't diskiver anything."

Less than a minute later a party of horsemen

consisting of twelve broad-shouldered and dark-faced men, drew rein before the little group in front of the new ranch.

"Hyer at last," said the man who rode forward and held out his hand to Major Ralph. "You hevn't seen anything ov that missing nephew ov mine, eh, major?"

"Roy!"

"Yes."

"He's liable to turn up safe at any moment," was the answer at which Heavy Hugh set up a shout of delight.

"We'll just alight hyer, boys."

The pards of Camp Coyote sprung to the ground, and Heavy Hugh introduced them to the rancher who had a welcome for all.

Maverick Mark stood aside and took in the scene with coolness.

"Gentlemen, let me introduce you to Maverick Mark from the Southwest," said Major Ralph, turning suddenly to the Border Rattler. "He's been our guest a short time and talks of leaving us to-morrow."

Confident of his disguise, Texas Trump stepped forward and met the men from across the *llano*.

He at once became the target for every eye, and met the scrutiny without a sign of fear.

"Ef thar war a smilin' palace hyer, gents, I'd invite yer up ter hev suthin' at my expense," he said to the Coyotes. "As it is, boys, ye'll take ther will for ther deed, though that doesn't quench thirst worth a continental."

In a short time, the pards were enjoying themselves on the soft, rich grass before the hacienda. They let their tired and hungry horses graze while they threw themselves on the ground and smoked the cigars which had been passed around by Inez's fair hand.

"Major, that guest ov yours," said Heavy Hugh, touching the Texan rancher at the first opportunity; "did you say he was Maverick Mark?"

"Yes."

"What's his business hyer?"

"He is on his way to the Brazos ranches ter buy cattle."

"It's a durned lie!" cried Heavy Hugh.

Major Ralph turned upon the Coyoter with a look of amazement.

"Thar never war' but one real Maverick Mark," the big man continued, "an' I happen ter know that he died five year ago on ther Rio Pecos. Major, I don't like ter break pleasant relations between you an' yer guest, but ther sooner that man gits away from Hermosilla, ther better it'll be for all parties concerned."

"Who is he?"

"Not Maverick Mark—that's sartain," answered Heavy Hugh, confidently. "I'll let yer know before he goes away."

From that moment, the Border Rattler was under espionage, and when he knew it not, the penetrating eyes of Heavy Hugh were upon him.

"I'll get under his shell before daylight, or turn my hoss's head toward Coyote," said the stalwart fellow. "That chap is stayin' hyer fer suthin'. He never thought ov buyin' cattle on ther Brazos ranches."

The sun went down, and the shadows of the trees, scorched by the late fire, fell long across the new ranch.

"I'll go an' look at my hoss, major," said Maverick Mark to the Texan, as he started toward the stables.

Heavy Hugh, who heard, stepped back and lifted a hand at a young man who was watching him from the grass. The youth got leisurely upon his feet, and walked through the group of trees near by.

"They stick liko leeches, hang their hides!" growled Maverick Mark, while he walked toward the stables. "They promise ter keep awake all night just ter beat me out ov a slick little game. By Jehosaphat! Heavy Hugh, if I had yer by ther throat, I'd show yer what Texas Trump's hands ar' made ov."

He reached the long, low stables attached to the ranch, and entered.

"What's this?" he suddenly exclaimed, as his hand came in contact with a bridled horse in the darkness. "This must be my hoss, an' saddled! Who did this?"

"The best friend ye hev at Hermosilla, cap'n," said a voice, and Texas Trump started back with his hand on a revolver, as several long fingers closed on his arm.

He knew the voice.

"Is it you, King, my boy?"

"It is the half-breed," was the reply. "I've saddled yer hoss because ye've got ter use him ter-night. They've thrown a net about yer, cap'n."

"No!"

"They hev! I tried ter see yer at ther ranch, but failed ter. Then I came hyer an' saddled the hoss, intendin' ter go back an' see yer at all hazards. Heavy Hugh says ye're not Maverick Mark."

"He does?" flashed Texas Trump. "He won't say that to my face."

"Don't try him, cap'n. You must go."

"Without makin' the stroke I had planned!"

"Yes."

Texas Trump was silent for a moment.

Suddenly he said:

"See hyer. You didn't do yer duty. You let Major Ralph escape when you burned the ranch."

"It wasn't my fault. The fire didn't reach him quite quick enough. Your drugged cigar failed to kill him. Ah, we both failed!"

"The next time there will be no failure!"

Texas Trump said these words between his teeth.

"If I go away, it will fasten the suspicion that I am not Maverick Mark," he went on. "By ther dust ov Cæsar! I'll stay!"

"An' lose ther ranch rose forever," said the half-breed boy. "Go back an' face Heavy Hugh an' pards ter die at ther end ov a lasso. Cap'n, yer must go. No goin' back ter ther hacienda now. You kin come back hyer in a new skin, an' nobody will know ther *llano* bird."

"Mebbe I've been follered!"

"Not yet. Now for the *llano*. King will go with yer, cap'n—unless yer want him ter do duty hyer."

Two minutes later Maverick Mark leaped to saddle in the shadow of the low stable which was between him and the hacienda.

"I'll shoot yer keen eyes out o' yer head afore I die, Heavy Hugh!" he said, sending a mad look toward the house. "I have yet another skin which I have never worn in these parts. I'll play that hand next."

He threw a look at the half-breed boy as he gathered up the lines. King was eager to pilot his master from danger.

"Halt!" rung out a voice so near that the two *llano* pards started and turned. "Dismount, both of you, or I'll send bullets through your skulls. This is no boy's game we play on ther borders ov ther *llano*. Get down, Maverick Mark, an' you, too, half-breed pygmy!"

Already the Border Rattler saw the young Coyote who stood a few feet away looking calmly into his face from behind a brace of leveled revolvers.

It was the youth Heavy Hugh had summoned from his lounging place in the grass.

"You stop a bad man when you interfere with Maverick Mark," said Texas Trump menacingly.

"I obey orders," was the answer. "About face now, an' march to the ranch."

The tramp was of short duration, and the young Coyote astonished all by calling for Heavy Hugh in front of the new ranch.

In an instant the boss of Camp Coyote came forward, and stopped in front of Texas Trump whom he eyed accusingly.

"Maverick Mark, eh?" he said. "Ther next time yer want a new name don't take a dead man's."

Was that all? Was there to be no charge that he was Texas Trump?

"By George! yer know a good deal ef you know me better than I know myself," laughed Texas Trump. "Ef I'm not Maverick Mark, as yer say, in ther name of fortune, who am I?"

"I will unmask him!" cried Inez springing forward at that moment. "If he is not the real Maverick Mark he can be but one other—Texas Trump. The boy at his side gives him away. He brought the decoy message to Roy the day Laced Leon was here. Laced Leon is Texas Trump; so is that man!"

"The beard is false, then," said Major Ralph. "Men of Coyote, when I lift my hand, shoot it from his face unless he removes it himself!"

Texas Trump saw that the game was up.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HALF-BREED'S BIG PLAY.

As erect as a statue and with fearless and flashing eye, the cornered sport stood before the ready revolvers of the Coyote pards.

"Unless I'm dropped in my tracks, I'll make it lively enough for all ov yer yet," he said under his breath. "I am ter jerk my beard off, eh, an' show 'em that I'm not Maverick Mark!"

"Off with the mask!" commanded Major Ralph at this moment. "If it is not removed when I have finished counting five, these men will proceed to shoot it away."

Texas Trump's hand moved to his face, and the next moment the false beard was jerked away and he stood revealed in his true character.

The Coyotes uttered exclamations of astonishment, the transformation from Maverick Mark to Texas Trump was so startling.

"Gentlemen, thar's no use ter cling ter false feathers any longer," said the *llano* desperado with a cool smile. "I stan' before yer as Texas Trump. Now proceed with yer trial."

He addressed the last words to the rancher upon whom he turned as he uttered them.

"Not now, though I should not hesitate to drop you in your boots," was the reply. "We shall hold you till Roy and his companions come back. Then, Texas Trump, I warn you you will receive no mercy."

There was no answer for a moment. The pest of the *llano* and Major Ralph exchanged looks of hatred.

"It takes cheek to play a game like this," suddenly said the rancher.

"A man with no cheek has no right ter ther *llano*," was the answer. "I guess Maverick Mark won't buy any cattle among ther Brazos ranchers, eh, major?" and Texas Trump laughed as though he was victor and not a condemned prisoner.

Heavy Hugh eyed the Rattler with eyes full of indignation. He saw in him the man who, as Happy Hank, had invaded Coyote and jumped with Roy, to follow up the sport with one of the coolest abductions on record, and a deed that made the blood run cold.

Texas Trump and the half-breed boy were put under guard. A lantern was hung to one of the pillars of the little veranda of the new house, and the Coyotes with cocked revolvers began to watch the prisoners.

Major Ralph had hopes that Jalisco Jack and party would return before daylight. They would not find Texas Trump in the old haunt; therefore he would put back to Hermosilla.

Slowly the hours of that night wore away.

King, the half-breed boy, flung himself upon the porch, and appeared to fall into a sound slumber as if he was in no peril.

Texas Trump occupied the chair which he had been ordered to fill at the muzzles of rifles and revolvers, and nobody seemed to take notice of the figure stretched at his feet.

Major Ralph went inside at midnight, after giving Heavy Hugh some instructions about guarding the prisoner, and the morning stars began their long vigils.

Texas Trump watched the lantern which flickered fitfully against its post. At times it would leave him in shadow for a second, but then he would always see the cool men who, wide awake as serpents, watched him closely.

It was the most perilous scene of his eventful career.

The pards of Coyote forgot the boy who had dropped asleep at the desperado's chair.

King was playing 'possum, for just after midnight he began to move away by degrees.

His movements were not noticed by any one; the Coyotes seemed asleep.

Instead of creeping toward the edge of the porch where he might drop into the grass, the wily half-breed moved toward the open door of the house, and drew himself across the threshold. His movement was accomplished unseen by keeping in the shadow of the *llano* bandit and his chair.

Once across the door-step the half-breed hugged the floor and let slip a breath of relief.

"If I don't get Texas out o' this brine, pickle me for a shrimp!" he ejaculated, his little eyes glistening like polished diamonds. "They must watch King when they guard his master. Ha! ha! the eyes of the Coyotes aren't sharp enough. We will yet get the livin' bonanza!"

The temporary house which had been erected was a one-story frame, consisting of three small rooms.

Inez's new boudoir was to the right of the door entered by the boy half-breed. He seemed to know this, for he crept toward it, moving slowly like a serpent and listening all the while.

The lantern threw a few fitful rays of light into the room thus entered, and showed King the half-open door of the chamber.

He reached the threshold, and listened.

For a moment he heard nothing, and then the low breathing of a sleeping person was discernible.

How the eyes of the boy half-breed scintillated now!

It was all for the man guarded on the porch, for the desperate sport whose slave and pard he had been for years.

There was no other hope. No rescue before daylight meant death to Texas Trump.

King seemed in no hurry, for he listened at the door for some minutes, or until he had located the sleeper. Then began a series of snail-like movements that ended in transferring himself into the room and crouching at the foot of the girl's couch.

He felt the bedclothes with his yellow hands, then took a lucifer from his pocket and drew it over the floor under the couch.

There was a tiny flash but no report, and the half-breed held the flame to the sheet for a moment.

"Now, let them beat Texas Trump of they can!" he laughed turning his back on the flame.

He glided out of the room, crept to the door of the porch and rolled himself back to the chair.

All this, while it took time, did not occupy many minutes.

There was victory in the eyes of the half-breed boy. He looked often toward the room from his old position.

All at once a wild shriek startled everybody. It came from the girl's room, and sounded like a cry of despair.

King knew what it meant. The yellow boy crouched at the feet of his doomed master felt a thrill of pleasure through his frame as that wild cry rang out.

"Fire by heavens! the ranch's on fire!"

The wakeful Coyotes leaped upon the porch forgetful of the man they were guarding.

"Fire it is," said King springing up. The young lady seems to be in danger."

Major Ralph rushed out half-bewildered by the cry and then, seeming to realize Inez's peril, he sprang back into the house!

The half-breed clutched the Border Rattler's arm.

"Quick! It was done for you, cap'n!" he exclaimed.

Texas Trump left his chair and dashed at the only man left to guard him in the momentary confusion. King sprung at the same object and both reached him at the same moment.

"I'm a tiger when I try myself!" cried Texas Trump, hurling the Coyote against the heavy pillar. "Thar never war a trap thet held Texas Trump long, an' this one isn't one ov that kind."

The twain dashed toward the horses of the camp pards, and had filled two saddles before the alarm was sounded.

"No foolin' hyer, cap'n," said the half-breed boy. "To-morrow will be your day for vengeance. Away!"

They turned the steeds and gave them the spur with crimson interest.

"I owe all this to you," said Texas Trump to the youth when they found themselves on the *llano*. "Your hand is in it somehow, but just how I do not know."

King looked at him with a smile.

"A hand an' a match, cap'n," he said with a grin. "King creep into the house an' set fire to the girl's bed."

"You did?" suddenly roared the desperado catching the boy's arm while fire seemed to start from his eyes. "Look hyer! you destroy the very bonanza I've been playin' for. Curse your head! King, whar war it when you did this thing?"

"They find the girl soon enough ter save her," was the response. "Fire no devour her, cap'n. King no fool when he plays a big hand like that."

"Ar' you certain? You failed the other time, you know."

"The hacienda went, but Major Ralph escaped. It will be the same way this time. House go mebbe, but they will save Inez, the ranch rose. Cap'n Trump kin play a new role now."

"An' won't I?" exclaimed the *llano* scourge. "I see no fire back yonder, King. They have saved the house."

"An' Inez, too."

"You couldn't go back an' see?"

"King go anywhar for Texas Trump."

The next minute the desperado was alone and the half-breed boy was riding back toward the ranch where he had played one of the shrewdest games of rescue imaginable.

"That boy is worth his weight in gold," Texas Trump ejaculated. "Now I am free to play a new hand. I wouldn't hav given much for my chances awhile ago, but King was plannin' his play all ther time. When I get ther bonanza, I'll reward him. I'll bu'st a dozen faro-banks an' throw ther winnin's at his feet."

Meanwhile, the half-breed boy moved cautiously toward the Texan ranch.

Strange to say, he heard no noise, no loud commands, and the tramp of no horses.

He knew that the fire had been extinguished before it inflicted much damage, and this fact told him also that Inez had been rescued.

He left his horse at the stables and crept forward on foot.

Half-way between stables and house he crouched suddenly and drew the bowie he had snatched from the belt of the Coyote charged by Texas and himself on the porch.

"I heard it," said a voice. "It was between us an' the horses."

King now saw the speaker, a man crouched like himself in the grass.

"Go f'rward an' settle the question," said another voice.

The man moved, he came toward the waiting and watching half-breed.

Retreat was out of the question. King had already advanced too far. He clutched the bowie and waited. The man came on.

All at once the half-breed boy sprung up from under the Coyote's very feet, and then leaped into his arms.

"Take this for ther cap'n an' King!" hissed the half-breed, and at the same time he delivered a blow with the knife.

A loud cry told that the blade had inflicted a terrible wound.

The Coyote's companions ran to his side.

"I'll master the half-breed baby!" the wounded man exclaimed. "I've got my arms about him. Get out o' ther way. I'm goin' ter throw him at Heavy Hugh's feet!"

He turned about and dashed toward the house with King a prisoner in his arms.

"Whar's Hugh?" he exclaimed, rushing up to a group of men, whose appearance told that they had heard the cry.

"Hyer, Red Rube! What on earth—"

"Hyer's ther *llano* rattler's serpent!" was the interruption. "He's cut me ter ther death. Take him—away!"

Red Rube's arms opened at that moment and King the half-breed dropped at Heavy Hugh's feet.

A dozen men seemed to spring at the boy. He was jerked from the ground in the twinkling of an eye, and a lasso produced from somewhere went over his head.

The men had been transformed into demons.

Over the sturdiest limb of the nearest tree the black cord was quickly thrown, and Texas Trump's boy pard was lifted from the ground.

"Hold!" cried Major Ralph, catching the rope. "He must show us the Border Rattler's trail first."

"Never! King war never yet a traitor," said the boy.

The Texan rancher was pushed back by the determined representatives of Coyote, and, at a signal from Heavy Hugh, the lasso tightened again. While Texas Trump waited for the pard who would never come.

CHAPTER XIV.

MATCHED ON THE LLANO.

In the bright red sunset of a summer day, a man who looked very commonplace, rode into Camp Coyote, and dismounting in front of its one saloon, went in and called for a drink.

His horse looked fatigued, and the man himself showed signs of weariness.

When he had helped himself to two draughts of liquor, he looked at a piece of paper tacked above the shelves, and then glanced at the bartender.

"Wanted—Texas Trump, eh?" he said.

"That's what ther notice says. It's been up thar for two months, stranger, an' nobody's stepped for'ard ter claim ther reward. What did he do? Oh, he's been raisin' pandemonium in one way an' another for years along both borders. His last play war on ther other side, at Hermosilla Ranch, which he an' his half-breed boy pard burned. They got ther boy, though, an' strung him up ter a limb, but Texas Trump himself got away. Major Ralph Rogers offers ther reward, an' he'll pay it dollar for dollar, too. Three hundred for Texas Trump dead, five for 'im alive."

"Who's hunted 'im?" asked the stranger with some interest.

"Nearly everybody. Coyote hez sent out a posse, an' ther other camps hev taken a hand."

"An' he's still at large?"

"My opinion is that he's left ther border. It's been scoured thoroughly. When Silent Sam, ther Mute Comanche, can't find his man, it's no use for white people to keep up ther hunt. Ther Injun war hyer an hour ago, an' Heavy Hugh

says he has about given up ther game. A young chap, named Roy Berdan, who outjumped Texas Trump in Coyote, once, gave up huntin' him, an' hez gone ter Hermosilla ter marry Inez, ther rancher's ward."

The stranger started slightly as this information was volunteered.

"I'd like ter hev five hundred myself," he said with a smile. "I believe I'll take Texas Trump ter Major Ralph."

"You'll hev ter catch ther *llano* rattler first, an' that's no child's play," said the whisky-dealer. "You don't mean ter say that you know whar he is, stranger?"

"Ef I did, I wouldn't post it in Coyote. I'm glad I've seen ther reward. I b'lieve I'll make a strike for it."

The man walked out to the horse waiting for him near the door.

"Five hundred for Texas Trump delivered alive at Hermosilla!" he ejaculated under his breath. "An' a weddin' too! For his Mazeppe ride, Roy Berdan is ter get ther livin' bonanza! I came hyer ter transact business with a sartain citizen ov Coyote. Whar is he? Mebbe he went away with ther Mute Comanche."

These words might reveal the man's identity to the reader. If not, those that followed surely will.

"I've played Laced Leon, Happy Hank an' Maverick Mark," the man went on, glancing about the camp with searching eye. "They kin post a thousand offers ov reward; they don't ketch ther Border Rattler asleep. Whar is ther hound who ordered ther pards ov Camp Coyote ter pull King up ter Major Ralph's tree?"

As if in reply to the inquiry, a stalwart man came from between the cabins and walked away.

"That's Hugh!" exclaimed the disguised desperado. "He doesn't dream that I'm within pistol-shot. Hung King, my half-breed pard, eh? I'm hyer ter worse than hang you, Heavy Hugh!"

Heavy Hugh did not appear to notice the man who watched him with a pair of eager eyes.

"What'd you give ter know that Texas Trump holds his eyes on ye?" chuckled the *llano* pest. "I'll be at ther weddin' ef it doesn't go off too soon. Come, hoss."

He walked off, with the horse following at his heels. Suddenly he called to Heavy Hugh.

The boss of Camp Coyote stopped and turned.

"Mebbe ye kin give a stranger a piece ov information," said Texas Trump, coming up, and speaking in a tone at variance with his true voice.

"Wal?" responded Hugh, looking at the speaker, who looked like an inoffensive, travel-worn man.

"Which is ther shortest route ter ther Brazos cattle-markets?"

Heavy Hugh stepped back a pace as though something startlin' was recalled by the innocent question.

"Ye'r' a long ways from them, pard," he said.

"Ther *llano* lies between us, eh?"

"Yes."

"I guess Llano Jack an' I ar' equal ter it," said Texas Trump nodding toward his horse. "Show me ther trail will yer?"

"Ye'r' not goin' ter try it with that hoss?"

"Bet yer boots, cap'n."

Heavy Hugh said no more, but motioned to the desperado to follow him.

Side by side the two men walked from Camp Coyote and the sun went down with them on the *llano* just beyond its borders, and near a clump of trees.

More than once during the tramp Texas Trump had thrown mad looks at Heavy Hugh, and once under the tree he looked like a tiger about to leap upon a victim.

The Coyoter proceeded to point out the way across the *llano*.

"If you run across Texas Trump you might take him to Hermosilla an' claim the reward," he suddenly laughed glancing at the man at his elbow.

"What'd you give to find 'im?" asked the sport.

"A good deal. I don't think I'd trouble Major Ralph for the reward."

"Why not?"

"I'd hang the grass snake myself."

"As you hung his boy pard, eh?"

The sentence seemed to end in a hiss, and Heavy Hugh whirled upon the speaker as it still sounded.

"Who told you that I hanged Texas Trump's boy pard?" he asked.

"I know it. Don't say yer did not, Heavy Hugh. What Texas Trump knows, he knows."

"Texas Trump?"

"As large as life! Ther *llano* rattlesnake has found you at last!"

The hand of Heavy Hugh darted toward the revolver in his belt, but the bronze fingers of the Border Rattler arrested it.

"No drawin' hyer!" he continued sternly. "When I knew by whose orders King war pulled up that night I said I'd get even with Heavy Hugh. I came ter Coyote for that purpose. I hev decoyed yer hyer. I want ter cross ther *llano*, but I know ther way. I'm going ter reach Hermosilla in time ter play ther biggest hand ov ther season. A weddin' thar they say, Hugh!"

The desperado laughed savagely in the Coyoter's face. The two men, stalwart fellows and bronze athletes, stood face to face in the dusk; they looked like gladiators about to engage.

"I play my game through in spite ov Satan!" Texas Trump went on. "I don't begin hyer with ther revolver that might put all Coyote on my track. I don't want ter be followed just now."

The next moment his clinched hand went up, and before Heavy Hugh could prepare for a blow one was dealt full in his face and he was sent staggering back.

"Silence hyer, thunder when I get ter Hermosilla!" ejaculated Texas Trump, following up the stroke by throwing himself upon Heavy Hugh who was trying to recover. "This is for ther neck-stretchin' yer gave King."

The boss pard of Camp Coyote was beaten back by the furious blows rained upon him by the Border Rattler, and at last the *llano* demon stood over an almost unconscious body.

"Now for a vulture feast," he said, taking from the saddle-bags thrown across his horse to complete his disguise, a well-coiled lasso; then climbing nimbly into the low-limbed tree, he threw one end over a bough.

Dropping lightly to the ground again, he slipped a noose over Heavy Hugh's head, and then fastened the loose end of the rope to his horse's girth, so that when the animal moved forward the Coyoter was drawn up into the branches.

"Eucher me all through ther game ef yer win!" ejaculated Texas Trump when he had fastened the lasso in the tree, in such a manner that neither it nor its victim could be seen from the ground. "Good-by, Heavy Hugh. Rope for rope, neck for neck! This is ther death law ov ther *llano*!"

He looked back toward Camp Coyote, but saw no one, then climbing upon the horse, which now showed no signs of fatigue, the moment he spoke to him he was off across the wild country that stretches between Hermosilla and the mining-camp.

The stars went down the trails of the sky, but Texas Trump kept on. He was not bound for the cattle-markets of the Brazos region, but for a scene where he had determined to play his last hand in the desperate game he had begun.

He had deceived Heavy Hugh. Why would he not deceive the denizens of the ranch?

Daylight found him still on the *llano*, but near to a group of trees, from which suddenly rode a single horseman, at sight of whom Texas Trump almost drew rein.

"Ther whisky seraph ov Coyote war right!" he exclaimed. "Thet feller is Silent Sam, ther Mute Comanche."

He could not avoid the Indian who had ridden from among the trees, for the red-skin had already sighted him and was waiting for him to come up.

"Hyer goes!" said Texas Trump dashing forward. "I won't let that red chap bother me long. At ther first opportunity I'll throw eight inches ov steel between his shoulders, or send a bullet whistlin' among his brains."

Forced to move ahead by the Comanche's actions, Texas Trump put on a calm face and galloped up.

"Hello!" he exclaimed as he drew rein beside the red-skin who looked out from under his black lashes. "Bound for ther Brazos kentry, eh?"

The Indian put his hand to his lips and shook his head.

"Playin' it yet, eh?" muttered the sport. "Flippo said you talked ter him ther night he found yer in the rock region. Wal, I don't give anything away."

The pair rode on together.

"Give me half a chance!" hissed Texas Trump, eying the red-skin askance with the glances of an eagle. "Hang me, ef I don't b'lieve ye'r' gettin' under my disguise."

The light grew stronger with the rising sun, and the two men, red and white, cantered across the level country with the east wind in their faces.

More than once the *llano* sport glanced at the bowie ready for his hand.

"Ef this red suspects as I b'lieve he does, I can't go ter ther ranch with him," he said to himself. "Ef he ever talks it will be when my bowie enters his back!"

All at once Texas Trump slackened his horse's gait just the least.

The action threw the Indian half a neck ahead.

"Now!" cried the *llano* serpent. "I go ter Hermosilla ter play my last card alone!"

He jerked his bowie from its nest as he rose in his stirrups. The naked back of the Comanche was a splendid target.

Up went the eight-inch blade as Texas Trump's eyes flashed fire.

"Now for a heart-hunt!" he cried.

The bowie had started on the downward sweep, when the red-skin whirled, and quick as a flash his hand caught the *llano* rattler's wrist.

"Texas Trump not quick enough for Silent Sam!" laughed the cool Comanche.

Texas Trump uttered an oath and tried to break the red-skin's hold.

"Sam know Border Rattler as soon as he see 'im," continued the Comanche still holding on. "Him go on to Major Ralph now. Big reward an' a rope waitin' at ther ranch."

Silent Sam leaned forward, and suddenly twisting the Rattler's arm till he almost howled for pain, made him drop the bowie. Then his revolver was jerked from his belt and flung away.

"Come," said the Comanche, drawing and cocking a revolver. "Texas Trump will see Roy an' ther ranch rose married."

"Not ef I git a chance ter play a final hand, an' ye'll hev ter watch me ef I don't!" said the desperado, settling back into his saddle. "I've come out first-best with big odds ag'in' me afore ter-day!"

CHAPTER XV.

DESPERATE TO THE END.

FOILED by the Indian and inwardly cursing his ill-luck, Texas Trump was compelled to ride weaponless over the plain, watched constantly by the keenest pair of eyes that ever gleamed in the head of a human being.

The Comanche did not look like a man who had achieved a success in which he rejoiced. More than once he looked at his companion in a half-regretful way, but he never offered him a chance for liberty.

The Border Rattler knew that at the first break he would receive a shot that would terminate his career.

Mile after mile the twain left behind them. Texas Trump longed for one chance—for one leap at the red-skin's throat, but the cherished opportunity was not granted.

A brilliant moon, surrounded by myriads of stars hung in the sky when the two rode down upon Hermosilla Ranch.

Silent Sam glanced significantly at Texas Trump.

"Oh, yer needn't look at me in that manner," muttered the *llano* rattler. "I know whar I am. I've been hyer afore an' under better colors than these homely duds. Ride on, my red galoot. Show me ter Major Ralph as ye'd show a captive tiger, but don't give ther tiger a chance ter display his claws."

The little house which had, for the present, replaced the pretentious hacienda home, fired by the half-breed's torch, stood on its gentle rise in the soft moonlight with windows well lighted and lanterns hung here and there on the trees, making a picturesque scene.

Texas Trump scowled darkly as he rode forward.

He had not counted on reaching Hermosilla as the prisoner of the keen red hunter then at his side, nor had he dreamed of going there unarmed.

"Hang me, ef we arn't gettin' hyer on ther weddin' night!" he exclaimed.

"Mebbe so," said the Indian.

"See hyer," and Texas Trump leaned suddenly forward and laid his hand on the Comanche's arm. "Why hev yer been playin' dumb all these years? By Jericho! you've played it well, Injun. What made ye do it?"

The Comanche turned away and for a moment rode on in silence.

"Texas Trump know pretty soon."

"Tell me now."

"Sam will."

The red-skin reined in his steed and turned upon the *lano* sport.

"Long ago Silent Sam took a vow before the Great Spirit that he would find the man who whipped a young Comanche woman one night in the country of the nation—that, until he was on the whipper's trail, he would speak no more. He has made many trails, he has hunted the *lano* with the patience of the wolf an' the eye of the eagle. That woman was the Comanche's daughter. She was the child of Lean Wolf, an' Lean Wolf is now S lent Sam!"

"Jehosaphat!" ejaculated Texas Trump.

"Texas, Silent Sam has found the whipper!" and the Comanche leaned forward and fixed his burning eyes on the *lano* sport. "He would not speak until he found he had made no mistake. He measured the foot-track of the man who whipped Niota; he has measured yours. No runnin' now, Texas. We will see Major Ralph first. Come!"

The hand of the Comanche darted forward and seized Texas Trump's arm, then, turning toward the hacienda, he spoke quickly to his horse.

"Mebbe," laughed the *lano* sport, under his breath—"mebbe, Silent Sam, ye've caught a Tartar. We'll see."

Five minutes later the twain passed among the trees that grew before the house, and the Comanche hailed a man who uttered an exclamation at sight of him.

It was Major Ralph, the Texan.

"Look," said the Indian, pointing at Texas Trump. "Sam has fetched you an old friend."

The rancher leaned forward and peered into *lano* rattler's face.

"Don't know me?" laughed the desperado. "Would you know me as Laced Leon or Maverick Mark, eh, major?"

"Texas Trump!" cried the Texan.

A quiet smile stole over the sport's face.

"What's goin' on hyer to-night?" he asked, looking coolly about upon the lanterns and the lighted house.

"A hanging will go on," said the rancher under his breath, but he replied aloud:

"You are in time to see Inez married, Texas Trump. Wait! let me introduce you to a young man whom you may know."

Major Ralph stepped back a pace.

"Roy!" he called.

A handsome young man turned and came forward.

"This is the fortunate gentleman," said Major Ralph with a laugh as he touched Roy on the shoulder and addressed the Indian's prisoner. "Don't you know him, Roy?"

Roy Berdan approached and looked up into Texas Trump's face then looked him over from head to foot.

"Heavens! I see him now!" he suddenly exclaimed starting back. "He made a Mazeppa out of me once. It is Texas Trump."

In a short time the news seemed everywhere. Men came forward with flashing eyes and looks of vengeance and inveterate hatred, but the massive figure of Silent Sam kept between them and the Texan.

It was soon discovered by the new-comers that the assembled company awaited the arrival of a person competent to tie the nuptial knot. The Texas parson lived twenty miles from Hermosilla, and had been sent for.

Texas Trump, now the observed of all observers, sat stoically in his saddle watched by scores of eyes.

"Arter ther weddin' a hangin', eh?" he murmured. "I kin see that in ther eyes ov yer all, but I'll hev suthin' ter say when it comes ter that."

Already a black lasso had been inspected by several Texans who glanced at Texas Trump during the operation. They forgot that Silent Sam claimed him as his prisoner, and that he would have something to say in pronouncing his doom.

"Thet parson isn't comin'," murmured the rancher's guests as the minutes crept away. "Let's have ther trial first."

"No, the wedding first," was the answer whenever Major Ralph heard these murmurs.

"I wonder ef ther girl'd know me?" suddenly laughed the *lano* rattler. "Ov course she knows I'm hyer, but—"

"Girl comin' now," interrupted the Comanche, and sure enough the next moment Inez, beautiful in her wedding robes, halted before the sport.

A gleam of recognition was in her eyes.

"I'm back in time ter see yer married, eh, my ranch pink?" exclaimed the Rattler. "I hedn't time ter put on ther weddin' garment, but I'm hyer all ther same."

"It is your fault," said Inez. "You should not have fallen into the chief's hands."

"Oh, hang it! a feller never sees half ther traps ther lie around him. Ther lucky man's ter be Roy, ther youngster who played Mazeppa for me once? Ha! ef ther major an' Jalisco Jack hedn't found 'im when they did, thar'd be no waitin' for ther parson ter-night."

There was no reply, only the eyes of the girl flashed resentment and she moved away.

"Worth playin' for, ain't she?" murmured Texas Trump following her with his eyes. "By heavens! ef I wait till ther preacher comes, I'll never get ter play my hand out."

Nobody saw the resolution that blazed suddenly in his black orbs. The crowd for a moment had parted in front of him; he had a clear path to the Rose of Hermosilla; she was almost within arm's reach.

It seemed that fate and fortune had united to make sure the desperado's last play.

Suddenly he gave his horse the spurs, and the animal shot forward.

He passed the nearest men like an arrow.

A wild cry of horror rent the air, and Inez turned.

"My bonanza yet!" grated Texas Trump, and the next second his hand closing on the girl, lifted her from the ground.

It was the work of a second; it seemed to paralyze the spectators. Past the house dashed the *lano* sport, and toward the *lano* that appeared to begin just beyond it. In an instant he was out of sight. He had been watched, but with no avail; the swoop of the Texan eagle had not been anticipated.

Roy Berdan ran for the nearest horse, but ere he reached it, Silent Sam flew by.

The Comanche was already in pursuit!

The horses that were mounted after him were the best in Texas, but the Indian's steed distanced all.

Out on the moonlit level a man was riding for life.

"It's Texas Trump's last play for ther ranch bonanza!" he said, looking down into the face of the young girl he held before him on the saddle. "Ef they hunt me, you will bo flung back ter 'em—dead!"

There was no reply other than the flashing of the captive's eyes.

Down upon this determined desperado dashed a half-naked Indian, who sat on his horse like a person born to the saddle. He saw the dark object flying through the moonlight.

Nothing balked the Comanche. He did not seem to think that the girl might be flung to him dead.

On, on! The black steed of the Indian gained steadily on the desperado.

Texas Trump looked back and saw it all.

"It's thet infernal red!" he grated, glancing at Inez, and the next instant he shouted over his shoulder: "Keep off, ef yer don't want ter carry a dead girl back! By the eternal! Texas Trump's last play will be ther most desperate one of his life! Keep off!"

As well might he have shouted against the wind.

The watching Indian came on like a thunderbolt. He saw only the man straining every nerve in the gleam of moon and star.

All at once Texas Trump lifted the ranch pearl from the saddle; he held her up to the red thundering down upon him.

The next moment the Comanche came alongside. His hand darted at the Border Rattler; he seemed to lift him from the saddle!

"Thar she is—dead!" hissed Texas Trump, as Inez dropped from his clutches.

A riderless horse passed on, for Silent Sam was lowering a man to the ground, and in the Comanche's left hand gleamed a Texan bowie.

No use to take Texas Trump back to the ranch for vengeance; the infuriated red had avenged the whipping of his child and the burning of Hermosilla—all at one blow.

Three minutes later a party of excited horsemen came up.

They saw the ruffian lying in the grass dead, at the end of his last game, and hailed with a shout the gasps of the girl, choked nearly to death!

The Indian said but one word when he looked down at his work:

"Niota!"

The play had failed. The swoop of the border eagle had resulted in his own death.

It was late that night when the Texas parson came, but he came, and the beauty of Hermosilla Ranch became Roy Berdan's bride.

Silent Sam looked on until the ceremony was complete, then touched Inez's hand and rode away.

He came back no more.

The next news that crossed the *lano* from Camp Coyote would have startled Texas Trump if he had lived. Heavy Hugh the man he had hanged in a tree had been rescued before life was extinct, and he came to Hermosilla to congratulate Roy, his nephew.

Flippo never found his way out of the cave into which Texas Trump dropped him, and died miserably in darkness—fit retribution for his sneaking crimes against Inez.

Where the old ranch stood is a new building to-day, and we need not say that it is the home of the rancher's ward.

Major Ralph still lives to give Inez's children lessons in riding, and to tell them about the *lano* rattler who, under numerous disguises, played more than one desperate game for their mother's hand.

It is all over now, and where he played deepest with his tool the boy half-breed, the deeds and the name of Texas Trump are almost forgotten.

Camp Coyote still exists and Heavy Hugh is a man of prominence there.

Jalisco Jack, I need not state, remains Major Ralph's boss herder, and where the Border Rattler died bloom the fairest flowers of the fertile *lano*.

THE END.

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